



## Summer EBT: The Proven, Cost-Effective Solution to Summer Hunger

When schools close for the summer, millions of children lose access to the free or reduced-price meals they rely on during the school year. This gap in nutrition leads to higher food insecurity and unhealthy weight gain for many children from households with low incomes.

The [traditional summer nutrition programs](#) — which include the Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option — play a vital role in ensuring children have access to nutritious meals during the summer months, but their reach is limited in some communities due to barriers like transportation and site availability. On an average day in summer 2023, these programs [reached just one in seven children](#) who received free or reduced-price school meals during the school year.

The newly permanent [Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer \(Summer EBT\)](#) Program helps to bridge this nutrition gap. Launched in 2011 as a demonstration project and made permanent in 2023, Summer EBT provides families with \$120 per eligible child to buy groceries during the summer. This program acts as a complement to the traditional summer nutrition programs and works to reduce household food insecurity and improve nutrition during the summer months. The program is optional and requires that the operating state, Indian Tribal Organization (ITO), or territory cover 50 percent of all administrative costs accrued in operating the program. The federal government covers the other 50 percent as well as provides all funds for the issued benefit dollars.

Despite Summer EBT's many benefits, some states are choosing to reject the federal funding available through the program and instead implement state-funded programs that reach significantly fewer children. Summer EBT is a proven, cost-effective way to reduce summer hunger and improve nutrition while strengthening local economies. State-run programs cannot match Summer EBT's reach, efficiency, or impact. States should leverage existing federal funding and participate in Summer EBT every year to ensure no child goes hungry when school is out.

### Research Shows Summer EBT's Success

Summer EBT has been [rigorously evaluated](#) since its inception in 2011. A 2016 evaluation of the Summer EBT demonstration projects found that participation led to several positive results including:

- **Reduced food insecurity:** By providing low-income households with \$30 or \$60 per month, per child benefit, the most severe type of food insecurity (very low food security) was reduced by one-third, and food insecurity was reduced by one-fifth.<sup>1</sup>

- **Improved nutrition:** Both the \$30 and \$60 monthly benefit levels led to an improvement in children's summertime nutritional intake, but children in households that received the \$60 benefit ate slightly more nutritious foods (fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) than those in the \$30 group.<sup>2</sup>
- **High rates of participation:** More than 75 percent of households in the program redeemed some or all of their benefits. While both models were efficient at reaching families, those who participated in the project modeled after the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) redeemed benefits at higher rates than those who were in the project that was modeled after the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) — 95 percent versus 83 percent. This is likely due to the comparatively limited availability of WIC retailers and the simplicity of redeeming the benefit through SNAP.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to SNAP, Summer EBT can also help boost local economies. Every federal dollar generates up to \$1.80 in economic activity; in 2024, Summer EBT delivered \$2.5 billion in benefits, generating at least \$3.8 billion in local impact.

### Summer EBT Program Timeline

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the first Summer EBT demonstration project in 2011. These projects were only operated in small portions of a handful of states but proved to be very successful.<sup>4</sup> In March of 2020, the Pandemic EBT program stepped in to help keep children fed during the school year and expanded to cover the summer months in 2021. As children were social-distancing at home, they no longer had access to free and reduced-price school meals each day. The Pandemic EBT program provided families with the benefit equivalent of a breakfast, lunch, and snack for each school day missed. As the pandemic continued through a second summer, the need for the same type of program to cover the summer months became apparent, and families received a similar benefit to keep children fed during that time. Based on the success of both programs, Summer EBT was expanded to be a permanent, nationwide program in December 2022.

In the [first year of implementation](#) (summer 2024), 37 states, Washington D.C., two Indian Tribal Organizations, and all five U.S territories opted to operate the program.<sup>5</sup> For 2025, three additional ITOs joined the program, and two new states opted in, Alabama and Utah. Two states that had previously participated — Tennessee and Indiana — chose not to participate.<sup>6</sup>

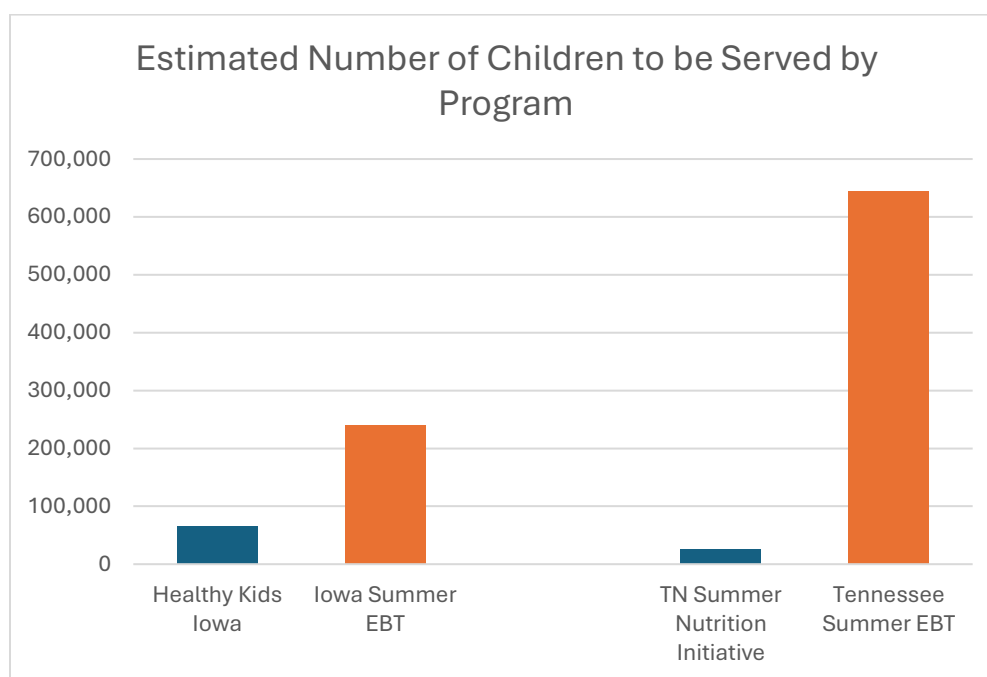
### State Alternatives to Summer EBT Fall Short

For summer 2025, two states chose to replace Summer EBT with state-funded programs, choosing to forgo federal dollars available to combat summer hunger. These efforts are unproven and reach far fewer children at much higher costs.

- [Healthy Kids Iowa](#) (HKI) offers \$40/month in food boxes from pick-up sites. This program is estimated to have reached 65,000 children<sup>1</sup> compared to the approximately 240,000 eligible for free and reduced-price lunch who would have received benefits through Summer EBT.

<sup>1</sup> Initial reports from the state indicate that fewer children were reached than the original estimate.

- **Tennessee's Summer Nutrition Initiative** provides \$120 in benefits for eligible households participating in SNAP in limited counties. This program will reach only 25,000 children — 4 percent of last year's Summer EBT participants in Tennessee — while costing over 15 times more per child to administer.



### *The Limitations of Food Box Programs*

Food box programs have been utilized on a small scale through both federal and state funding over the years. Healthy Kids Iowa operates similarly to those programs, with families visiting pre-determined sites to select \$40 worth of food each month.<sup>7</sup> It requires families to travel to a site to pick up a box once a month, which is a known barrier in access to Summer Nutrition Programs.<sup>8</sup> The launch of this program follows the rejection of a similar new program proposal in 2024 where the state of Iowa proposed to distribute food boxes utilizing the funding structure of Summer EBT,<sup>9</sup> with USDA stating that the proposal did not provide enough evidence that the new program would reach children in the way that the research-backed Summer EBT Program does.<sup>10</sup> Providing benefits to purchase food at stores is also an important economic driver and food boxes do not achieve the same results.

Only 65,000 children were estimated to have access to HKI; during the 2023–2024 school year, over 192,000 children received a free or reduced-price school lunch on an average day.<sup>11</sup> This means that at least 127,000 children who would be eligible to receive benefits through Summer EBT missed out. According to the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, the program served just 54 percent of those it was aiming to serve with the program in June. This means that only 35,318 children were served through HKI that month.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the initial feedback to food pantries on the quality of the food available was less than stellar, with families receiving boxes with pre-determined food items that were not always the most appealing or culturally relevant options,<sup>13</sup> despite the state assuring that families would be given fresh and healthy options. Food banks and food pantries that were HKI sites also bore the brunt of the cost to keep the program running this summer, with the Food Bank of Iowa stating that they had to spend between \$700,000 and \$800,000 of their own dollars this summer on the program.<sup>14</sup>

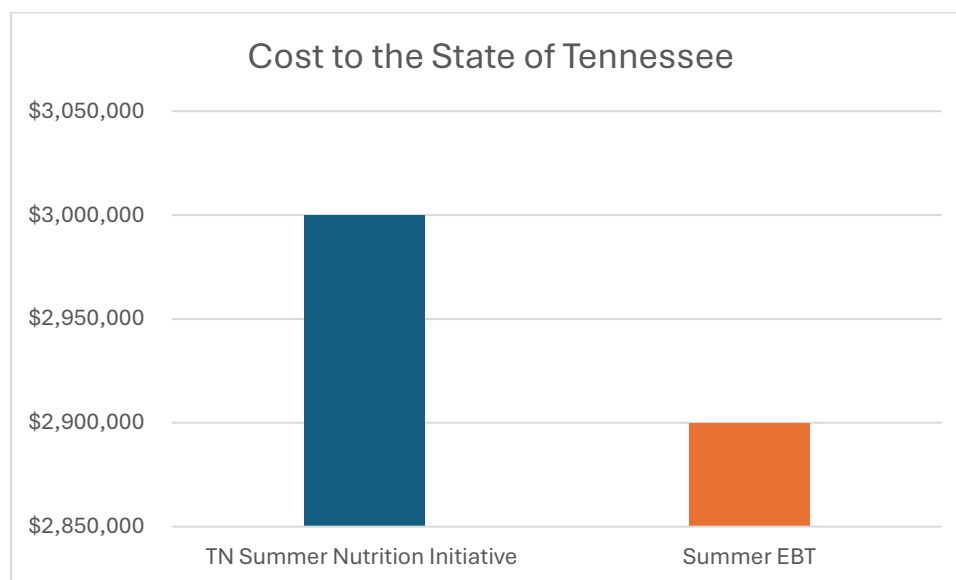
The barriers and issues that arose during the first year of HKI mirror the issues that have come up in other food box programs: Families have limited access to the program due to transportation barriers, which results in fewer children participating; distributing food boxes makes it harder for families with dietary restriction to participate as they are not always able to access foods they can consume; and the cost of running these programs is immense, and state or federal dollars cannot always cover all of the expenses of running these programs.

### *Tennessee's State-Funded Summer Benefit Program*

After running the federal Summer EBT Program in 2024, the state of Tennessee chose not to participate in 2025. Instead, the state launched a program that will provide \$120 to purchase groceries for children in households that participate in SNAP or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This program was set to serve only 15 of Tennessee's 95 counties, reaching no more than 25,000 children, or 4 percent of those children who were eligible for Summer EBT in 2024.

In 2024, Tennessee's Summer EBT Program reached 700,000 children and drew down over \$77 million in benefits. While the state had to cover 50 percent of their administrative costs (totaling \$5.8 million), the benefits were covered by the federal government. This state-run program is set to cost the state \$3 million while reaching only a portion of the children who could benefit from additional support during the summer.

Without the federal benefits, the new program will cost the state a minimum of \$120 per child, whereas the cost per child to the state was only around \$8 in 2024 through the federal Summer EBT Program. Tennessee is electing to reach fewer children for a higher state price tag. This decision will hurt children the most and put them at greater risk of hunger.



### **Summer EBT Is an Effective Tool to Combat Summer Hunger**

By participating in Summer EBT, states unlock returns on an important investment in children's health and well-being. While testing new programs to support children and families with food access during the summer should be encouraged, states must commit to implementing Summer EBT at the same time. Not doing so leaves federal funding on the table and leaves families at greater risk of summertime food insecurity.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Collins et al. (2015). *Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) demonstration: Summary report 2011–2014*. Prepared by Abt Associates, Mathematica Policy Research, and Maximus. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/ops/sebtfinalreport-summary.pdf>. Accessed on May 20, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> FRAC facts: *The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program (Summer EBT)*. Food Research & Action Center. Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/frac-facts-summer-ebt-program.pdf>. Accessed on: May 19, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2024). *2024 SUN Bucks implementing states, territories, and tribes*. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sebt/implementation>. Accessed on May 19, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2025). *2025 Participating tribal nations/states/territories*. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/summer/sunbucks#:~:text=The%20Summer%20Electronic%20Benefit%20Transfer,to%20benefit%20from%20Summer%20EBT>. Accessed on May 19, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Gov. Reynolds, Iowa HHS announce ‘Healthy Kids Iowa’ summer program to feed more school children. Office of Governor Kim Reynolds. Available at: <https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2025-05-07/gov-reynolds-iowa-hhs-announce-healthy-kids-iowa-summer-program-feed-more-school-children>. Accessed on May 20, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Oghaz MH, Rashoka F, Kelley M. Barriers to Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) implementation before and after COVID-19: A qualitative, collective case study. *Curr Dev Nutr*. 2022 Jun 14;6(Suppl 1):113. doi: 10.1093/cdn/nzac051.029. PMID: PMC9193415.

<sup>9</sup> Iowa submits Summer EBT waiver request for demonstration project that feeds more children, leverages existing programs. Office of Governor Kim Reynolds. Available at: <https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2024-08-15/iowa-submits-summer-ebt-waiver-request-demonstration-project-feeds-more-children-leverages-existing>. Accessed on May 21, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Sostaric, Katarina. *USDA rejects Iowa’s food box plan, and anti-hunger advocates ask Reynolds to accept Summer EBT*. Iowa Public Radio. 2024. Available at: <https://www.iowapublicradio.org/state-government-news/2024-11-25/usda-rejects-iowas-food-box-plan-and-anti-hunger-advocates-ask-reynolds-to-accept-summer-ebt>. Accessed on May 21, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Hayes, C., FitzSimons, C. (2024). *The reach of school breakfast and lunch during the 2023–2024 school year*. Food Research & Action Center. Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reach-Report-2025.pdf>. Accessed May 20, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Hernandez, S., & Tugade, F. A. (2025, July 22). *How Iowans are feeding kids with monthly \$40 food boxes, no Summer EBT*. Des Moines Register. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2025/07/22/healthy-kids-iowa-summer-meal-sites-summer-ebt-feeding-children-knock-and-drop/83818536007/>

<sup>13</sup> Bradstream, L. (2025, September 10). *State summer feeding program bears problems, costs for food banks*. Times Republican. <https://www.timesrepublican.com/news/todays-news/2025/09/state-summer-feeding-program-bears-problems-costs-for-food-banks/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.