

# Best Practices for Providing Free Nutritious Meals at Emergency Shelters Through CACFP

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**SCOPE** | State, County, Local

**PROGRAM** | Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

**PRACTICE** | Help children 18 years of age and under who are residing in emergency shelters (e.g., homeless, runaway, or domestic violence) receive up to three free meals per day, year-round, through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) shelter funds. This funding is also available to provide meals to adults with disabilities who reside in shelters where children receive free meals through CACFP.

**WHY** | Too many shelters — and too many states — do not use CACFP funds to provide vital nutritional support to families experiencing homelessness or domestic violence, runaway children and teens, as well as to the cash-strapped shelters where they temporarily reside. (The federal law calls these shelters “emergency shelters” in the CACFP program.) CACFP shelter funds:

- ✓ help connect children to nutritious meals during a stressful period of housing instability;
- ✓ use a sustainable federal funding stream to reimburse shelters for meals served every day of the year; and
- ✓ feature special rules that take into account the difficult circumstances homeless families and youth face in order to streamline the application and administration of the program.

With many families struggling around the country with unemployment, underemployment, low wages, and an affordable housing crisis, too many people experience homelessness, which often goes hand-in-hand with hunger. Large numbers of other families must turn to shelters because of domestic violence or the need to protect a

child from abuse. LGBT youth may seek shelter to protect against discrimination, violence, or rejection by their families.

**BACKGROUND** | CACFP typically is administered at the state level through the state’s education or child care agency. Shelters participating in CACFP can be reimbursed for up to three meals or two snacks and one meal each day. Meals must be served in group settings and be made free to all children 18 years of age and under.

All meals and snacks are reimbursed at the free CACFP rates, which are updated every July. Shelters also can receive federal commodity foods or a “cash-in-lieu” of commodities reimbursement of \$0.24 for each lunch and supper. Shelters may receive commodity foods and food donations to supplement CACFP reimbursement for meals. Each shelter is responsible to make sure meals, including those that rely in part on commodities or donated foods, meet CACFP nutritional guidelines and document the number of meals served to eligible children.

Special rules for shelters take into account the difficult circumstances often faced by families and youth seeking shelter. For instance, while child care facilities must determine whether children qualify for free, reduced-price, or paid meals to enroll in CACFP, shelter providers do not have to ask families to prove their income or complete any applications for their children. As a result, all children are deemed eligible for free meals and all meals are reimbursed at the free level.

To be eligible, shelters must comply with all applicable state or local health and safety standards, including any required inspections or permits.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, unlike child care centers or family day care homes, there is no federal requirement for emergency shelters operating under this provision to have either federal, state, or local child care licensing or approval as a condition of eligibility.<sup>2</sup> This special rule takes into consideration the different roles of a shelter versus a child development center.

Note: At shelters where children are participating in CACFP, states also may use CACFP funding for shelter residents of any age with disabilities as defined by the state agency.

**KEY STEPS** | To help implement the program in your state:

- contact the state agency administering CACFP to find out if any shelters have accessed this funding;
- make sure your state agency has the ability to get CACFP program funding to shelters;
- partner with homeless and other emergency shelter networks in your state to identify eligible shelters; and
- work in concert with your state agency and shelter networks to promote the program.

**TIPS** | Know the definitions of what type of institution is eligible for this funding. Under 7 CFR § 226.2, an eligible shelter includes:

- a public or private nonprofit organization or its site that provides temporary shelter and food services to homeless children and/or their families; and
- a residential child care institution (RCCI), but only when the RCCI serves a distinct group of homeless children who are not enrolled in the RCCI's regular program.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and states have interpreted this provision to include homeless, runaway, and domestic violence shelters, and transitional housing facilities that provide emergency shelter on a non-permanent basis, including homeless families housed temporarily in motel rooms.

**SPOTLIGHT** | An emergency shelter serving 50 children three meals a day is eligible for \$400 per day (about \$8 per child per day) in federal reimbursements. Over the course of the year, the shelter could receive more than \$146,000 in federal funding to feed children three free nutritious meals for 365 days.

**CHALLENGE** | Shelters may not have the same staff capacity or familiarity as child development centers or homes to administer a federal nutrition program.

**LESSON** | It is important to provide upfront support for shelter staff to understand how the program works and what paperwork needs to be completed for meals reimbursements. Check with your state agency to see if a CACFP sponsor is available to help the shelter with administering the program. Some state agencies — like the Connecticut State Department of Education — have a CACFP staffer designated to assist all interested shelters in order to better respond to the unique needs of running CACFP at shelters.

## MORE RESOURCES

- The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-336) (effective July 1, 1999) authorized emergency and homeless shelters to participate in CACFP.
- For more information on [CACFP](#), refer to FRAC's website.

## MEALS IN EMERGENCY SHELTERS

- 7 CFR Part 226 Child and Adult Care Food Program: Age Limits for Children Receiving Meals in Emergency Shelters<sup>3</sup>
  - This interim rule amended CACFP regulations to implement a provision of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. It raised the age limit for residents of emergency shelters who are eligible to receive CACFP meals to include children through age 18 and extended eligibility for participation to shelters that primarily serve children through age 18 who are homeless and seeking shelter without their families.

- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS) webpage that provides an [\*overview of Meals in Emergency Shelters\*](#)<sup>4</sup>
- USDA-FNS webpage that includes [\*guidance on CACFP Emergency Shelters\*](#)<sup>5</sup>
- The [\*Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services\*](#)<sup>6</sup> and the [\*Indiana Department of Education\*](#)<sup>7</sup> have web pages with application materials and other resources devoted to CACFP availability for emergency shelters.

**For technical assistance, contact:**

Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)  
1200 18th Street, NW  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20036  
202.986.2200  
<http://frac.org/>

For more on ending hunger, read FRAC's [\*A Plan of Action to End Hunger in America\*](#).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See 42 U.S.C. 1766(t)(4) at: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/1766>

<sup>2</sup> See 42 U.S.C. 1766(t)(3) at: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/1766>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2006). *7 CFR Part 226 Child and Adult Care Food Program: Age Limits for Children Receiving Meals in Emergency Shelters*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2006-01-03.pdf>. Accessed on July 20, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (last update July 16, 2014). *Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Meals in Emergency Shelters*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/meals-emergency-shelters>. Accessed on July 20, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (last update June 2, 2016). *Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Emergency Shelters*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/emergency-shelters>. Accessed on July 20, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services. (n.d.). *Emergency and Homeless Shelters*. Available at: <http://health.mo.gov/living/wellness/nutrition/foodprograms/cacfp/homeless-shelter.php>. Accessed on July 25, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Indiana Department of Education. (last update July 14, 2016). *CACFP: Homeless/Emergency Shelters*. Available at: <http://www.doe.in.gov/nutrition/cacfp-homelessemergency-shelters>. Accessed on July 20, 2016.