

The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program (Summer EBT)



The Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) program offers an exciting opportunity to reduce summer hunger by providing additional resources to purchase food during the summer months for families whose children are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year.

Summer EBT is a complement to the Summer Nutrition Programs (which support summer meal programs in low-income communities that are frequently combined with educational, enrichment, and recreational activities) and can help reduce food insecurity for low-income families, particularly in rural or other areas with limited access to summer meals.

History of Summer EBT

Summer EBT was initially funded through the Agriculture Appropriations Act of Fiscal Year 2010 (Public Law 111-80), which gave the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) the authority to test innovative methods to reduce food insecurity during summer vacation. USDA launched Summer EBT in 2011, as a demonstration project to test the impact of providing summer nutrition benefits through an EBT card to low-income families with school-age children. In its first year, the program provided 12,500 low-income families with children a debit card with a fixed dollar amount to purchase groceries during the summer months.

Due to the pilot project's success, Congress invested additional resources into Summer EBT through the annual appropriations process. The funding allowed USDA to increase the number of states participating and the number of children served. In 2018, Summer EBT grew to serve 300,000 children across eight states (Connecticut, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia) and two Indian Tribal Organizations (the Cherokee Nation and the Chickasaw Nation).

In fiscal year 2019, USDA released a request for applications to operate Summer EBT for three consecutive summers. The request prioritized new states, new projects, projects that demonstrated exemplary customer service, and projects that included the implementation of a statewide plan. Notably, funding that previously would have been spent in one summer is now being spread out, reducing the number of children that will be served each summer. In addition, most of the states that had been included in Summer EBT in prior years were not chosen to participate. Funding was limited to two states (Michigan and Wisconsin), the Chickasaw Nation, and the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona. In fiscal year 2020, USDA selected states and tribes that previously operated Summer EBT in 2018 to participate in a multi-year project, including Connecticut, Missouri, Oregon, and the Cherokee Nation. The move away from continuing to build and invest in the Summer EBT structure to serve more children highlights the need to make it permanent and significantly increase EBT funding through child nutrition reauthorization or other legislative vehicles.

¹ Abt Associates Inc. (2016). *Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report*. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/sebtfinalreport.pdf>. Accessed on October 24, 2019.

Evaluation of Summer EBT

A 2016 report¹ assessed Summer EBT. The report evaluated the impact of providing two different levels of monthly summer benefits (\$30 and \$60) as well as the different distribution models: a specific monetary value available for food purchases, similar to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), compared to benefits tied to specific food items, similar to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In the SNAP model, eligible households received a monthly benefit per child (to purchase SNAP-eligible foods). In the WIC model, eligible households received one Summer EBT food package per child, per month.²

The evaluation found that participation in Summer EBT led to several positive results:

- **Reduced food insecurity:** By providing low-income households with a \$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.
- **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.

- **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 SNAP redeemed benefits at higher rates than those who were in the project that was modeled after 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.

Conclusion

Summer EBT offers an exciting opportunity to reduce summer hunger. Summer EBT should expand under the SNAP model, except for states that already have operated under the WIC model and tribal nations (which administer WIC, but not SNAP). Whenever possible, children need both food and academic and enrichment activities provided at summer sites in order to return to school at the end of the summer ready to learn. However, Summer EBT offers a way to ensure that children and their families have enough resources to support a healthy diet at home when they lose access to the free and reduced-price school meals that they rely on during the school year to help make ends meet.

² Abt Associates Inc. (2016). *Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report*. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/sebtfinalreport.pdf>. Accessed on October 24, 2019.