



Pandemic EBT: A Critical Opportunity for States

FRAC will update this resource as additional information about P-EBT develops. This resource includes information as of May 29, 2020.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) creates the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, an important opportunity to provide nutritional resources to families who are losing access to free or reduced-price school meals as schools across the country close in response to COVID-19. P-EBT provides households an EBT card with the value of the free school breakfast and lunch reimbursement rates for the days that schools are closed. Schools must close for at least five consecutive days in order for families to receive a P-EBT card.

P-EBT Eligibility

Eligible households include those whose children are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals and children who attend schools that offer free school meals to all students (such as community eligibility, Provision 2, or Provision 3 schools).¹

State Plans

In March, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service provided [guidance to states](#) on implementing P-EBT. For a state to provide P-EBT benefits to households, the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Child Nutrition Agencies must submit a joint plan to USDA that describes how they will operate P-EBT. The plan must include the following:

- How the state will provide P-EBT benefits to the eligible families who participate in SNAP and to the eligible families who do not participate in SNAP.
- The amount of the benefits that will be provided. The value of the benefit is the free reimbursement rate for school breakfast and lunch (typically \$5.70/student/day) for the number of days that the state is providing benefits. States can use an average number of days to calculate benefit levels and an average end date for school closures. Benefits can be issued retroactively. [See questions 10–12.](#)
- The anticipated implementation date(s). States can include two implementation dates: one for families who participate in SNAP and one for those who do not.
- A public information campaign to inform eligible families and the general public about the purpose of P-EBT and how the benefits can be used.

¹ An eligible child includes those who attend a school that offers free school meals under section 11(a)(1) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (1759(a)(1)). This includes the special universal school provisions (such as community eligibility and Provision 2).

Information Sharing

FFCRA allows State child nutrition agencies and school nutrition departments to release information to SNAP administrators in order to implement P-EBT. Sharing information between child nutrition and SNAP agencies will be critical to providing all eligible households P-EBT cards, and should be considered as states develop their plans. [See question 8.](#)

Strategies to Identify Eligible Families

Across the country, SNAP offices are struggling to respond to the growing number of families and individuals who are becoming eligible for SNAP benefits. At the same time, social distancing is being encouraged in most if not every community across the country, and many states and communities are beginning to shelter in place if they have not yet been doing so already. Developing a process that relies on technology, and limits the need for individual families to apply for benefits, will be critical to ensuring that eligible families receive a P-EBT card, and that SNAP agencies are not overwhelmed.

For many states, the first and easiest step will be to increase benefits for all families with school-age children who participate in SNAP. For the other eligible families, states will have varying capacities and will be able to develop different plans based on their data systems. Ideally, states will be able to draw on existing data for as many eligible families as possible and minimize the number of eligible families who must apply. Options could include drawing on the existing direct certification system for school meals, the student data available at the state level, and other data sources that could provide a path for providing benefits to families who do not participate in SNAP.

- States that maintain school meal eligibility and student information at the state level may have the capacity to provide information for all school districts directly to the SNAP agency.
- States may be able to have districts share information directly with the SNAP agency. Data capacity and the number of school districts within the state may impact the viability of this approach.
- States may find that Medicaid data can be used to reach more eligible families seamlessly.
- States that collect student identification numbers in their SNAP applications may find it easier to track which eligible students are already receiving SNAP.
- States may find that they can use the same approach in their automated systems for issuing P-EBT benefits that they use for Disaster SNAP for households that do not participate in SNAP.
- For families who cannot be issued benefits based on data from other programs, states may need to develop a very simple application, preferably available online or by telephone. The head of household's social security number or date of birth are not required to issue P-EBT benefits and should not be included in the application. [See question 17.](#)
- For non-SNAP households, a signature is not required from the head of household to receive P-EBT benefits, and there is flexibility in identifying the head of the

household, including allowing states to send benefits to the “parent or guardian of” the child. [See questions 6 and 18.](#)

Things to Consider

One of the biggest challenges that states may face is the reliability of household mailing addresses. If school districts or the state are going to share data to make the process more seamless, they could consider reaching out through their communications systems now to confirm addresses so that eligible families will receive their P-EBT cards.

States also should consider the process for serving newly eligible families. Because of the economic fallout from the crisis, a growing number of families are losing income and becoming eligible for SNAP each day, and are becoming eligible for P-EBT as well when schools close. Similarly, families are becoming eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, which highlights the importance of thinking through the process of certifying families as schools are closed, such as setting up a process to qualify families when they arrive at a site that is distributing meals through the child nutrition programs.

As states develop their plans, USDA may need to provide additional program flexibilities in order to ensure that eligible families receive benefits, and to minimize administrative work for SNAP offices that are already struggling to serve the increase in families eligible for SNAP.

School districts and community organizations are still able to provide meals through the child nutrition programs in states that implement P-EBT. [See question 9.](#)

Partnerships

Partnering with community stakeholders can help state agencies prepare and submit comprehensive plans to ensure that all eligible children receive P-EBT benefits during COVID-19 school closures, and can address the issues raised above. Community stakeholders also may be able to help with outreach.

Resources

Visit FRAC’s [P-EBT webpage](#) for the latest list of approved P-EBT states, a P-EBT FAQ, P-EBT Communications Toolkit to get the word out about P-EBT.

- [USDA Q&A: Pandemic EBT \(P-EBT\)](#)
- [USDA’s State Guidance on P-EBT](#)
- [FRAC’s Community Eligibility webpage](#)

For more information on efforts and opportunities to ensure children have access to nutritious meals during COVID-19 school closures, visit [FRAC’s COVID-19 Updates webpage](#).