

Wolf Administration to Federal Government: When School is Virtual, Pennsylvania Kids Still Rely on School Meals to Thrive

Harrisburg, PA – Today Wolf Administration officials raised their voices for Pennsylvania’s kids, calling for the federal government to extend waivers that have allowed Pennsylvania to provide 24 million meals to school children. Waivers expire at the end of the month, ending access to breakfast, lunch and afternoon snacks for school-age children and their younger siblings.

“Earlier this week my counterparts and I urged USDA Secretary Perdue to take action to allow Pennsylvania to continue feeding our school children as we have from the start of the pandemic through this summer,” said Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding. “It’s one thing for children to lose school plays and birthday parties with friends, but access to food is a human right. These kids are relying on us to advocate for their food security.”

Without immediate federal action to extend national waivers for the following flexibilities, hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania children risk being pushed into food insecurity, which will place an even greater burden on Pennsylvania’s charitable food system. The Wolf Administration is urging the following actions:

- Allow the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) to be used to feed children during the 2020-21 school year. Permitting both schools and nonprofits to continue use of this waiver would significantly reduce administrative burdens, limit confusion of where meals can be accessed, allow meals to be provided at locations most convenient for families, and help to limit overt identification of children from low-income households.
- Expand the non-congregate and other approved waivers for the National School Lunch Program to the SFSP and SSO to allow these programs to be used to feed children when they are not physically in school. Extending these waivers will allow community-based nonprofit organizations to assist schools in meeting the needs of children at locations that work best for families, particularly on days when children are engaging in remote, virtual learning.
- Extend the Area Eligibility waiver for SFSP and SSO through the 2020-21 school year. Allowing feeding sites to provide meals in communities that do not meet the 50 percent free or reduced-price threshold for area eligibility has been essential to providing necessary food to children despite the uncertainty and stress that has come with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Waive the Afterschool Activity Requirement for the Afterschool Meal and Snack Programs available through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) through the 2020-21 school year. This waiver is critical for CACFP sites to be able to provide access to meals and snacks when providing the activity component isn’t otherwise safe or feasible.
- Allow those providing meals through the SFSP or SSO to also serve through the Afterschool Meal and Snack Programs. While children receiving meals through SFSP or SSO are only able to receive two meals per day, USDA allowed a third meal to be provided under guidance issued through the unanticipated school closure waiver. This waiver was critical over the past six months in providing three meals a day to children in need of food assistance and will be critical to continue in order for community-based nonprofit organizations to replicate the meal options being provided by schools.

The Department of Education, in coordination with the Department of Health, recently provided [additional guidance](#) to Pennsylvania schools to help them effectively mitigate against COVID-19 as they consider which instructional model they should implement based on changing levels of community transmission across the commonwealth. As schools select which instructional model best suits their community, they should be guided first and foremost by health and safety and not by food access concerns.

“When COVID-19 triggered last spring’s school closures, communities were able to work together to ensure every child had access to meals by using waivers and flexibility provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture,” said Education Executive Deputy Secretary Pam Smith. “However, by extending only a few of the waivers, USDA is creating barriers to accessing the meals families depend on and will put students around the commonwealth at risk for food insecurity.”

As the administration works with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to impress the importance of extending these waivers, Pennsylvania families worried about food access for the upcoming school year are encouraged to explore the variety of assistance programs available:

- [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#): Formerly known as food stamps, SNAP provides assistance to low-income and working Pennsylvanians, allowing them to purchase produce and groceries for themselves and their family. SNAP helps more than 1.9 million Pennsylvanians, including children, people with disabilities, older adults, and working Pennsylvanians expand purchasing power to ensure their household has enough food to avoid going hungry. SNAP is issued through a monthly payment to an electronic benefit transfer card, and benefits are based off income and household size. People can apply for SNAP online at www.compass.state.pa.us at any time.
- [National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs](#). Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level, children in families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and children in families receiving food stamp benefits are eligible for free breakfasts and lunches. Children in families whose income is between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced price breakfasts and lunches. Households can apply for this program by visiting [Pennsylvania’s COMPASS website](#) or by contacting their local school or district.
- [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#): Women who are pregnant or have had a baby in the past 6 months, or 12 if breastfeeding; infants and children under age 5; and fathers, grandparents, and foster parents who are the legal guardian of a child under age 5, may apply for WIC. WIC applicants must reside in Pennsylvania, have a medical or nutritional risk, and have a gross household income that does not exceed 185 percent of the U.S. poverty level.
- [WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program](#): This program runs from June 1 through November 30 each year, and recipients must be on the WIC program to receive this benefit. Children 1 year and older, and pregnant/post-partum women will receive vouchers for the program during their quarterly WIC visit (May through September).

In addition to applying for the benefits above, Pennsylvanians can receive immediate access to food resources by visiting a Feeding Pennsylvania or Hunger-Free Pennsylvania member food bank. Pennsylvanians out of work and without pay as a result of COVID-19 are [eligible to receive](#) state and federally sourced foods from Pennsylvania’s food banks and pantries.

“Programs and support networks like these exist to help all of us in the moments we cannot plan for — the times that an injury or an accident changes our life and sense of security as individuals, and the times that a global pandemic alters our daily life as a society,” said Department of Human Services Secretary Teresa Miller. “These programs are needed for many in the best of times, and they are critical in the worst. I urge anyone who knows someone who is struggling to make ends meet or needs assistance themselves to remember that help is always available.”

For more information on food security in Pennsylvania including information about resources and actions taken by the Wolf Administration, visit agriculture.pa.gov/foodsecurity.