# THE CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM: EVALUATION OF STATE AGENCY WEBSITES

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# BACKGROUND

**The Child and Adult Care Good Program (CACFP) is a federally funded food assistance program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) benefiting children at risk for food insecurity and poor diet.**[1] CACFP reimburses participating child care facilities at free, reduced-price, or paid rates depending on the enrolled children's family income. To be reimbursed, CACFP-participating programs must serve food that meets nutrition standards that encourage a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, whole grains and limit added sugar and saturated fats. CACFP participation has been associated with higher nutrition quality of meals and improved children's dietary intake. It can also help families by saving up to $33.15 (in FY2021/2022) in weekly food costs per child and provides financial support from reimbursements and free nutrition training to participating sites. Despite its advantages, CACFP is not used by many eligible child care providers,[2] and little is known about their motivation to participate in CACFP.

At the University of Connecticut, we conducted a national study to assess participation in CACFP across states, with the goal of improving access to CACFP for children in need. We collected CACFP participation data to identify participation rates, patterns, and predictors of CACFP access. State agency CACFP website quality is potentially one important factor influencing CACFP access in each state. Ease-of-use, availability, and clarity of online resources are likely very important for new and existing CACFP programs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior research at Harvard University studied user-friendliness of licensing state agencies "by assessing availability and quality of resources for healthy childcare settings."[3] Their tool informed the development of our CACFP website assessment scorebook, described below. We anticipated a positive association between state agency CACFP website scores and state CACFP participation rates collected in our research for licensed child care centers.

[1.] Child and adult care food program. Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). Retrieved April 26, 2022, from https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp
[2.] Andreyeva, T, Sun, X, Cannon, M, & Kenney, E. (2021). The Child and Adult Care Food Program: Barriers to Participation and Financial Implication of Underuse. Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2021.10.001
[3.] Kenney, E., Mozaffarian, R., Frost, N., Ayers Looby, A., & Cradock, A.L. (2021) Opportunities to Promote Healthy Weight Through Child Care Licensing Regulations: Trends in the United States, 2016-2020. Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2021.02.023

# METHODS

**Between December 2021 and March 2022, Rudd Center researchers developed a scorebook and assessed state agency CACFP websites.** For this sample, 45 state and District of Columbia websites were evaluated. Five states (Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Montana, and North Carolina) were excluded from this analysis as administrative data from state agencies on licensing and/or CACFP participation was not available. Two researchers independently assessed and scored all websites, then discussed and agreed on each score.

The scorebook evaluated three main areas: General, New Programs, and Current Programs (see Appendix A). The General section assessed nine items regarding basic CACFP information and website layout. The New Programs component evaluated six items related to application materials and resources. The Current Programs portion evaluated eight items such as operational forms and memos, trainings, and nutrition resources. Each scorebook item was determined to be available: "No" (0) or "Yes" (scored as 1 or 2). The only possible objective score of 2 was for "synchronous remote training," as this was determined to be an especially important resource during the COVID-19 restrictions. "Yes" was often classified into further components, so each item could earn multiple points. For example, some scored items were awarded an additional point if materials were up to date. The total maximum possible score was 49 points. After initial analysis, researchers decided to further evaluate each website's "ease-of-use" on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being the most user-friendly.

# KEY FINDINGS

**After reviewing each state's CACFP program website, total scores ranged from 7 to 37, with a median of 27 and mean of 25 (see Appendix B).** Many states with high participation rates scored above average, but this pattern was not consistent across all states. However, there did appear to be a weak correlation between website score and CACFP participation rates, particularly in higher-income areas. There was also no direct association between the website score and the state agency responsible for CACFP (e.g., Department of Education, Department of Health, Office of Early Childhood, etc.). The overall score for each state did not always reflect the ease-of-use of the website, as some items were located only after multiple screens/clicks. Generally, those states with low overall website scores also rated low on website user friendliness; however, the highest overall website scores did not necessarily receive a 5 for ease-of-use. Only two states with high CACFP participation rates received a 5. Nine states received a 4 and had very good participation rates. However, some states with decent participation rates did not have user-friendly websites (see Appendix B).

## WEBSITE RECOMMENDATIONS

### General features

- Consistency with hierarchy of information cohesive throughout site (format/theme flows throughout site)
- Detailed/bolded tabs with drop-down menus
- 1-2 clicks to find desired information
- Up-to-date information and resources
- Short, digestible content; no walls of text
- Balance of white space, text, and images
- Good color contrast and enlarged fonts
- Mobile responsive (website is mobile device friendly)
- Avoid password protection on information for the public

### CACFP-specific features

- CACFP-specific menu accessible from main page
- Information sorted by type of program (center, home, adult, at-risk, etc.)
- Clear tabs/sections for application information, forms, trainings, meals, etc.
- Ability to submit a program eligibility pre-screener online
- Easily found contact information of CACFP staff (phone number, email, type of assistance covered to properly direct questions)
- Access to data on current participating centers and sponsors

## CACFP TRAININGS

**One section of the scorebook focused on availability and types of online CACFP trainings.** While most states listed trainings on their sites, there was significant variation in the type and number of trainings. Due to COVID-19, almost all listed trainings were offered in some virtual format, whether it be prerecorded on-demand videos, PowerPoint presentations, PDF packets or synchronous remote trainings. Live, in-person trainings were less common, although some states indicated such sessions would resume later in 2022. Most states offered the required CACFP and civil rights trainings, and many provided optional trainings, such as how to apply for CACFP, how to use the online claim system, or food preparation and safety. Several states used material from USDA and the Institute of Child Nutrition. Some states partnered with outside training vendors like Brighton or Schoology to provide online trainings, which generally required passing a post-training quiz to obtain course credit. Regardless of how or when it was offered, all trainings were free of charge to CACFP participants.

## POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS

**Password protected applications and/or trainings prevented the reviewers from gaining full access to all state agency CACFP website resources.** This may have resulted in lower scores for states with password restrictions. While this practice helps protect participant privacy, it may also be an obstacle for child care centers to access and apply for CACFP. Another limitation of this evaluation may be the reviewers themselves. While the reviewers dedicated a substantial amount of time searching through websites, many child care center directors may not have the time or motivation to search so extensively for CACFP information. Therefore, the reviewers' approach to utilizing the state agency CACFP websites may not represent how real-life users would interact with the sites, which may have resulted in higher scores for some websites that required significant determination to find desired resources.

# CONCLUSION

**This assessment of state agency CACFP websites aimed to identify a possible predictor of CACFP participation rates among licensed child care centers.** While no clear relationship was found among overall website scores, "ease-of-use" scores, and CACFP participation rates, this process led to the development of a useful tool for evaluating availability and quality of online state agency program resources. This scorebook may be further developed to score CACFP websites more accurately or adapted to evaluate other program sites. Further research and analysis must continue to evaluate possible factors affecting CACFP participation rates to improve access to CACFP for children in need.

# Appendix A: State Agency CACFP Website Scorebook

| Completion Date and Scorer's Initials | |
|---|---|
| State Name | |
| State Agency | |
| State CACFP Website Link | |

| Scoring Items | Available | Possible Max Score | Scoring Guidance |
|---|---|---|---|
| **GENERAL** | | | |
| **1. CACFP basic information** | No | 0 | Only basic information on CACFP, such as CACFP is sponsored by USDA |
| | Yes | 1 | Helpful information, including links to USDA federal site, meal patterns, reimbursement rates, eligibility |
| | Yes | 1 | Postings indicate most current information (e.g., reimbursement rates for FY 2021-22, memos from FY 2021/22, dates of posting are recent) |
| **2. Website easily navigated using a CACFP-specific menu bar** | No | 0 | No CACFP-specific menu available |
| | Yes | 1 | There is a CACFP-specific menu bar |
| **3. Specific tabs indicated for forms** | No | 0 | No separate tab(s) for any forms |
| | Yes | 1 | Separate tab(s) for any forms |
| **4. Information on/list of CACFP vendors (i.e., food service companies offering CACFP meals and/or snacks)** | No | 0 | No information/list available |
| | Yes | 1 | Contact information/list provided for vendors |
| | Yes | 1 | Vendor bid specifications, sample contracts for vendors provided (specific to CACFP) |
| **5. Access to complete list of current in-state CACFP participating programs (e.g., childcare centers)** | No | 0 | No list available |
| | Yes | 1 | List available for download and/or viewable on website |
| **6. Access to complete list of current in-state CACFP sponsors** | No | 0 | No list available |
| | Yes | 1 | List with contact information available |
| | Yes | 1 | List of sponsors includes type of programs they serve (e.g., unaffiliated centers, homes) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **7. CACFP specialists' contact information available for program support** | No | 0 | No contact information for CACFP staff available |
| | Yes | 1 | CACFP contact phone number provided |
| | Yes | 1 | CACFP contact email provided |
| | Yes | 1 | Contact information identifies specialist's role to properly direct questions (e.g., assistance with CACFP application) |
| **8. Website advertises outreach/ social media/newsletter** | No | 0 | Not available |
| | Yes | 1 | Instructions/links available to connect to CACFP program via social media or CACFP newsletter (Do NOT include social media for the entire agency, CACFP only) |
| **9. Overall impression of website quality** | N/A | 1 | Limited |
| | | 2 | Good |
| | | 3 | Excellent |

## NEW PROGRAMS

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **10. Pre-screener for CACFP eligibility** | No | 0 | Not available |
| | Yes | 1 | Pre-screening form(s) to assess CACFP eligibility |
| **11. CACFP application available online** | No | 0 | No online application available |
| | Yes | 1 | Application process is outlined step by step |
| | Yes | 1 | Application available for download and/or online completion (including initiation application) |
| | Yes | 1 | Instructions for completing CACFP application available |
| **12. Application is password protected** | Yes | 0 | Password required to access application |
| | No | 1 | No password required to access application |
| **13. Management plan in CACFP application** | No | 0 | No template for management plan available |
| | Yes | 1 | Template provided |
| | Yes | 1 | Instructions for completing management plan are provided |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **14. Checklist for new applicants** | No | 0 | No checklist available |
| | Yes | 1 | Checklist for completion of all steps/forms in CACFP application process is available online |
| **15. Training for new programs/ applicants provided** | No | 0 | No training available |
| | Yes | 1 | Training available for completing application process |

## CURRENT PROGRAMS

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **16. Capability of submitting claim forms online** | No | 0 | Unable to submit claims online |
| | Yes | 1 | System to upload/submit claim forms online |
| | Yes | 1 | Instructions to submit claim forms online |
| **17. Availability/listing of operational forms** | No | 0 | No operational forms available |
| | Yes | 1 | At least some forms available (e.g., meal count form, monitoring form, menu templates) |
| | Yes | 1 | Forms are current based on posting date, revision date or document date/period coverage (e.g., FY 21/22) |
| **18. Availability/listing of operational or policy memos** | No | 0 | No operational/policy memos available |
| | Yes | 1 | USDA memos posted on website (e.g., information about waivers) |
| | Yes | 1 | Forms are current based on posting date, revision date or document date/period coverage (e.g., FY 21/22) |
| **19. Trainings are password protected** | Yes | 0 | Password required to access trainings |
| | No | 1 | No password required to access trainings |
| **20. Mode of required trainings** | No | 0 | No trainings available |
| | Yes | 1 | In-person training |
| | Yes | 1 | Pre-recorded videos or PowerPoints available on-demand |
| | Yes | 2 | Synchronous remote trainings |
| | Yes | 1 | Trainings are current based on posting date, revision date, and/or document date/period coverage (e.g., FY 21/22) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **21. Frequency of required training offerings** | No | 0 | Offered less than once per month |
| | Yes | 1 | Offered at least once per month or on demand |
| **22. Availability/listing of optional trainings** | No | 0 | No links to USDA state-specific trainings available |
| | Yes | 1 | Information for optional trainings available |
| | Yes | 1 | Trainings are current based on posting date, revision date, and/or document date/period coverage (e.g., FY 21/22) |
| **23. Menu and nutrition resources provided** | No | 0 | No resources available |
| | Yes | 1 | Links to USDA sample menus (not including recipes) |
| | Yes | 1 | Links to USDA recipes and buyer's guide |
| | Yes | 1 | Sample menu (e.g., one week menu, no cycle) |
| | Yes | 1 | State-sponsored menus (e.g., 4-week cycle menus) |
| | Yes | 1 | Links to/forms for state-specific production records |
| | Yes | 1 | Resources are current based on posting date, revision date, and/or document date/period coverage (e.g., FY 21/22) |

# Appendix B: CACFP Overall Website & Ease-of-Use Scores

| State* | Website Score | Ease of Use Score** |
|---|---|---|
| Arizona | 32 | 5 |
| California | 25 | 2 |
| Colorado | 34 | 5 |
| Connecticut | 29 | 3 |
| Delaware | 30 | 3 |
| District of Columbia | 22 | 2 |
| Florida | 30 | 2 |
| Georgia | 37 | 4 |
| Hawaii | 29 | 3 |
| Idaho | 21 | 2 |
| Illinois | 34 | 4 |
| Indiana | 31 | 3 |
| Iowa | 20 | 2 |
| Kansas | 34 | 3 |
| Kentucky | 29 | 1 |
| Louisiana | 36 | 2 |
| Maine | 30 | 2 |
| Maryland | 8 | 1 |
| Massachusetts | 10 | 1 |
| Michigan | 32 | 4 |
| Minnesota | 34 | 3 |
| Mississippi | 24 | 2 |
| Missouri | 35 | 3 |
| Nebraska | 27 | 2 |
| Nevada | 11 | 1 |
| New Hampshire | 19 | 2 |

| State* | Website Score | Ease of Use Score** |
|---|---|---|
| New Jersey | 29 | 3 |
| New Mexico | 23 | 1 |
| New York | 23 | 1 |
| North Dakota | 12 | 1 |
| Ohio | 14 | 2 |
| Oklahoma | 24 | 2 |
| Oregon | 23 | 4 |
| Pennsylvania | 7 | 1 |
| Rhode Island | 24 | 4 |
| South Carolina | 18 | 3 |
| South Dakota | 16 | 2 |
| Tennessee | 19 | 2 |
| Texas | 33 | 4 |
| Utah | 27 | 4 |
| Vermont | 27 | 4 |
| Virginia | 30 | 2 |
| Washington | 31 | 3 |
| West Virginia | 26 | 2 |
| Wisconsin | 33 | 4 |
| Wyoming | 10 | 1 |

*AL, AK, AR, MT, NC were excluded from this analysis, as administrative data from state agencies for FY 2019/20 was not available.

** where 5 = most user-friendly