

USDA Summer Meal Waivers

Permanent Adoption Will Improve Food Access

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Background

When school is out of session, students lose access to school meals and are more likely to experience food insufficiency.^{[i],[ii]} The USDA summer meal programs seek to fill this gap by providing free meals and snacks to children in eligible community settings. However, compared to participation in school meals, participation in summer meals is extremely low. In summer 2019, **just 13.8% of children participating in school meals received a summer meal.**^[iii] Low participation is attributed, in part, to: (1) poor access to meal sites, which can only operate in areas where at least 50% of students are eligible for school meals; (2) rules prohibiting sites from offering meals “to-go”; and (3) rules requiring meals be served directly to children at constrained times.^{[iv],[v]}

USDA SUMMER MEAL WAIVERS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA temporarily waived several program rules to increase program access and efficiency.

- 1. Area Eligibility Waiver:** Allowed meal program sites in any area, regardless of family income.
- 2. Meal Times Waiver:** Allowed distribution of multiple meals outside of standard meal times.
- 3. Non-Congregate Feeding Waiver:** Allowed meals “to-go”.
- 4. Parent/Guardian Meal Pick-Up Waiver:** Allowed parent meal pick-up without children present.



WHAT HAPPENED DURING COVID-19?

Student participation and summer meal distribution increased.

- Participation in July nationwide increased 123% in 2020 and 101% in 2021 compared to 2019.^[vi]
- In 2022, waivers were extended late and not fully utilized by programs. Participation decreased dramatically, nearly returning to pre-pandemic levels.^[vii]
- In New York, between August 2019 and 2020, the number of meals distributed increased 288%.^[viii]
- In Maryland, some sponsors operating multiple sites increased meal distribution by over 3,000%.^[ix]
- In Connecticut, meal distribution increased 84% in July 2020 and 69% in 2021 compared to 2019.^[x] This was due, in part, to program options that increased participation at each site.^[xi] When the waivers ended, participation in 2023 dropped down to pre-pandemic levels.^[xii]



Meal site availability improved.

- In Connecticut, the number of sites serving breakfast increased 61% and the number of sites serving lunch increased 31% between July 2019 and July 2021. ^[x]
- In St. Louis, the average number of summer meal program sites in low-income neighborhoods was nearly five times higher in summer 2020 than in summer 2019. ^[xiii]
- In Texas, more meals sites were open in July 2020 than in July 2019, and sites were spread across more census tracts. An estimated 213,158 children gained access to a meal site in July 2020 compared to July 2019. ^[xiv]



Food service administrators and parents preferred the new rules.

- Interviews with food service administrators in Maryland found that the package of waivers offered by USDA was critical for operating summer meal programs. ^[xv]
- In Connecticut, food service administrators reported that the waivers allowed them to solve problems related to program participation flexibly and creatively. ^[xvi] They also felt that the waivers, particularly the ability to take meals “to-go”, reduced program stigma.
- Connecticut parents participating in summer meals were enthusiastic about the waivers, reporting that the ability to pick up multiple meals at once, to take meals “to-go”, and to pick up meals without their child present all positively influenced their decision to participate. ^[xvii] They cited several benefits of a “to-go” option, including less interference with work schedules and more opportunities to cook and eat with children at home.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 summer meal waivers increased availability of summer meal program sites, substantially increased participation in summer meal programs, and were well-received by parents and food service administrators. It is evident that offering these program flexibilities long-term will improve access to nutritious meals for children when school is out of session. Thus, we urge Congress to consider the following policy changes:

1. Allow sponsors to incorporate congregate and “to-go” meals in ways that best meet the needs of the community.
2. Reduce the area eligibility threshold to 40% and allow states flexibility to demonstrate need through other means.
3. To maximize the benefits of summer meals, support youth access to summer enrichment activities and align summer meal nutrition standards with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

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