

The Hunger Free Summer for Kids Act of 2015

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What does this bill do?

The summer meal program is a lifeline for millions of children who rely on school meals during the school year. However the current model only reaches about one in six of those children. The majority of children in need are left out each summer, often because they live in communities where they are not able to access a summer meals site.

The current summer feeding model requires children to consume meals at a designated congregate feeding site. Most sites establish eligibility by being designated an “open” site. To qualify as an open site, the site must be in areas where at least 50 percent of school children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals (at or below 185 percent of poverty).

Summer meals sponsors across the country have articulated that the best way to reach more children during the summer months is to allow communities to adopt program models that better fit their needs. This legislation includes two policies that would make it easier to reach more kids in rural and other underserved areas. Specifically, the bill provides states the option to implement summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) or non-congregate feeding in targeted areas where sites are not practical. These two options will exist in coordination with the current site-based model and are focused on reaching children in hard-to-reach communities who are most underserved currently by the program.

Summer EBT

The bill will provide states the option to implement a summer EBT program to eligible households in rural communities and in communities not eligible to operate open summer meals sites. This option will use the WIC EBT infrastructure to deliver the EBT benefit. Participants will be able to purchase specified nutritious food for their children.

Off-site Consumption

The bill provides flexibility from the requirement that children must consume their meal at a designated summer feeding site. This program option, which includes mobile feeding programs, backpack meal programs and other meal delivery options, was tested in the USDA demonstration projects and will be available in areas that meet any of the five criteria: 1) in communities not eligible to operate open summer meal sites, 2) in rural communities, 3) in cases of extreme weather or public safety concerns, 4) when sites are only open for one meal a day, and 5) when sites are open four days a week so that two meals can be sent home for the days the site is not open.

These options are based on proven, evaluated pilot programs that reduced childhood hunger and reached hundreds of thousands of children across the country that otherwise would have gone hungry. By incorporating these tested models into the summer meals program, states and communities will have additional options to ensure that more children have access to meals during the summer.

2. How will the proposals in this bill fit into the current structure of the summer meals program?

The proposals in this bill are targeted to increase the number of children accessing summer meals by providing additional models targeted to hard-to-reach areas where sites aren't feasible or leave large gaps. Nearly 9 million low-income children live in communities that are not eligible to operate an open summer meals site and another 1.5 million live in rural communities where operating the summer meals program is often not feasible or sustainable. For example, in Kansas alone there are 44 counties without a single congregate meals site.

Additionally, many sites and sponsors, especially in rural areas but in other communities as well, are only able to operate programming a few days a week or for only a few weeks of the summer. Given the long distances required to deliver meals to some sites and the few children that attend them, these sites are often hard to establish and sustain. By incorporating non-congregate meals into the current site structure in certain areas, these congregate sites are able to become stronger and more sustainable.

By providing additional options to reach children, the bill offers the flexibility to address many challenges faced by program sponsors in rural and suburban communities, to reach kids who live in mixed income communities, and to address unique circumstances such as extreme weather and public safety concerns. It supplements rather than replaces the site-based model and strengthens summer nutrition for low-income children.

3. How many children will this bill impact?

With full implementation, as many as 6.5 million children across the country who rely on free or reduced price school meals during the school year but are underserved by the current program would have the opportunity to get the food they need during the summer months.

4. What is the summer EBT program? How was the benefit level set for this bill?

Summer EBT is a proven, effective way of reducing hunger during the summer months, especially in hard-to-reach areas like rural communities. The summer EBT program in this bill would provide households with children qualified to receive free or reduced-price school meals and who don't have access to a safe, convenient site. The summer EBT card will use the WIC EBT infrastructure to deliver the EBT benefit. Families would use the summer EBT card valued at \$30 a month, per child, to purchase specified nutritious food to replace meals the children would otherwise receive at school.

The demonstration project underwent a rigorous evaluation, finding that providing \$30 per month for each eligible child reduced very low food security among children by more than 30 percent. It also led to greater consumption of healthy foods including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and dairy, and lower consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.

This model removes many of the transportation and other logistical barriers for families and providers and enables the low-income children living in communities not eligible to operate an open site to have access to healthy food during the summer.

5. What were the results of the non-congregate demonstration projects on which these policies are based?

Starting in 2011, USDA began operating non-congregate feeding demonstration projects to test innovative ways of reaching children who don't have access to a safe, convenient congregate meals site during the summer months. Overall, the demonstration projects improved access to healthy summer meals, reduced hunger, and allowed community organizations to more effectively and efficiently reach children, especially those in rural communities and for children living outside of communities eligible to operate open summer meals sites.

The non-congregate demonstration projects included meal delivery options and backpack programs, where community providers bring food to a location closer to a family's home or where children are sent home with a meal. Evaluations of the project found it increased access to summer meals for children and reduced many barriers community organizations face in operating the summer meals program.

The demonstration projects also saw providers deliver nutritious, fresh and balanced food safely to households. In this bill, all non-congregate meals sent home with children would have to meet the same standards for quality and safety as those served at a congregate feeding site. In the demonstration projects and in similar privately funded meal delivery programs such as mobile feeding, providers incorporate many fresh fruits and vegetables, including bananas, blueberries, broccoli and cauliflower.

6. How can these options continue to strengthen enrichment opportunities for low-income children during the summer months?

One of the strengths of the Summer Food Service Program is that it is able to work in conjunction with summer programming to ensure children have access to nutritious food along with enrichment activities – summer camp, reading programs, and mentoring – that strengthen the whole child's growth and development.

Unfortunately, the far majority of children who need summer meals do not have access to these enrichment programs. The goal of this legislation is to leverage efficient and effective methods to feed these children, so that community groups can both ensure all children are fed during the summer months, as well as focus on expanding feeding sites where they can.

Community groups can also leverage partnerships within the site-based model to ensure there is some enrichment component to the feeding option. In the demonstrations, some sponsors provided nutrition education materials with each meal delivered in rural areas and with summer EBT outreach, others provided books in the meals sent home in backpacks. In privately funded meal delivery programs, providers have partnered with public health departments and education departments at local Universities to design educational resources specifically for this type of interaction.

7. What's at stake?

Summer is the hungriest time of year for children from low-income families. During the summer, the school-based infrastructure goes away and children are dispersed. Public-private partnerships have worked for years to increase the participation rate to ensure that children do not go hungry during the summer months. Today, despite the hard work of community and national organizations, the summer meals program is reaching only one in six, a mere 18 percent, of children in need.

The long term impact of summer hunger is real. Research shows that child food insecurity increases during the summer months. In a nationwide survey of public school teachers, more than 80 percent of teachers report being worried about how their students will get enough to eat during the summer months. Without proper nutrition in the summer, children are at greater risk of negative health outcomes and face significant learning loss. Summer hunger impacts our nation's health, education, and economic competitiveness.

Requests for more options to reach children have come from across the country. Since 2010, 15 states, with support from community organizations, have submitted waiver requests to USDA for more flexibility in operating the Summer Food Service Program to allow innovative models to continue to grow. Nearly all requests specifically call for more options outside of congregate feeding to address specific challenges. USDA has denied almost all requests due to a lack of statutory authority.

Without the policies in this bill, we simply cannot meet the scale of the summer hunger crisis.

8. How does this bill fit into the broader Child Nutrition Reauthorization process?

This bill is considered a 'marker bill', meaning its provisions must be incorporated into the larger Child Nutrition Reauthorization process to become law. Currently, the Senate Agriculture Committee is set to review and pass its child nutrition bill on September 17th. Language from this marker bill should be included in the CNR legislation.

This bill is aimed to complement marker legislation that has already be introduced, such as the Summer Meals Act. The Summer Meals Act includes strong policies to streamline the summer meals program and afterschool meals program, and that language should also be included in the CNR legislation.

These policies should be moved forward by the Senate Agriculture Committee, and also included in the House Committee on Education and the Workforce's CNR process.

9. How can I show support for the Hunger Free Summer for Kids Act?

Please ask your Senator to co-sponsor the S. 1966 Hunger Free Summer for Kids Act of 2015. If your organization would like to sign on in support of the marker bill, please add your name here <http://goo.gl/forms/mhjNXHeSeh>.