

Make Child Nutrition Waivers Permanent: A crucial step toward feeding more children



Key Take Away

Program flexibilities provided by the nationwide COVID-19-related waivers reduced the administrative burden on SFSP sponsors and enabled them to innovate distribution models to better serve children during out-of-school times, such as during the pandemic.

2022 Legislative Opportunities

Keeping Schools Meals Flexible Act (H.R. 6613) would extend all 12 nutrition waivers through the upcoming school year until June 30, 2023. Without the extension, the current nationwide waivers will expire in June 2022 and reduce flexibilities, which may limit future meals distribution and participation.

The extension of the child nutrition program waivers through school year 2022-2023 was excluded from the **omnibus spending bill** on March 10. As Congress makes plans to move forward on additional pandemic relief or an economic recovery bill, the waivers and other child nutrition program provisions, including expanding community eligibility and creating a nationwide Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (Summer EBT) program should be included in the next legislation that Congress takes up.

Our Study

During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers from the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health collaborated with Maryland Hunger Solutions to investigate the impact of emergency COVID-related waivers on sponsors of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Sponsors were invited to complete an online survey and an in-depth interview to share about their experiences operating in 2020. This brief highlights qualitative findings from the in-depth interviews with SFSP sponsors.

Research Shows:

In response to COVID-19-related school closures in 2020, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued the following nationwide waivers to allow more flexibilities in Summer Food Service Program (SFSP):

1. Mealtime Flexibility Waiver—allows service of meals outside of the standard mealtimes
2. Non-congregate Feeding Waiver—allows for meal pick-up (e.g. grab and go meals) and off-site meal consumption
3. Parent/Guardian Meal Pickup Waiver—allows parents and guardians to pick up meals for participants
4. Area Eligibility Waiver—eliminates restrictions that limit service to areas where at least half of the children are in a low-income household

Between 2019 and 2020, Maryland SFSP meal participation increased by over 3000%. Sponsors highlighted the importance of these four waivers in helping them dramatically increase the number of meals served from 2019 to 2020 (1, 2). Sponsors expressed the desire for the USDA to permanently implement these waivers (1). The waivers were extended through June 30th, 2022; however, their status and the flexibilities afforded to the SFSP remain uncertain after this point.

Policy Recommendations:

Based on the findings from interviews with SFSP sponsors, we recommend **permanently implementing all four USDA-issued SFSP waivers**.

The flexibilities afforded to the SFSP due to the waivers reduced longstanding barriers to summer meals operation for sponsors and participation for families during the pandemic. The non-congregate meals and mealtime flexibility waivers enabled sponsors to develop creative distribution models while adhering to COVID-19 physical distancing protocols, such as grab-and-go and multiple-day food boxes. The parent/guardian meal pickup waiver helped sponsors to address transportation and logistical barriers which historically limited families' ability to access summer meals because children needed to be physically present at the site. Finally, the area eligibility waiver allowed sponsors to expand their reach to more children in the areas they serve in, regardless of the income-eligibility status. The pandemic-related waivers ultimately supported sponsors' ability to increase the number of meals served to children in summer 2020 (3).

What Maryland Sponsors Are Saying:

“Between the non-congregate meal waiver, the parent/guardian pick up waiver, and the area eligibility waiver, those were the ones that we used and became the most beneficial for our county.” **(Public school sponsor)**

“All the waivers, in my opinion, gave us more accessibility to feed children. I don't think any of the waivers came to us in a more restrictive manner.” **(Public school sponsor)**

“The waivers have been extremely helpful, creating the flexibility for our sites to operate a program that they feel is safe and complies with public health recommendations.” **(Nonprofit sponsor)**

“We were very appreciative of the waivers, [they] made all the difference in the world” **(Public school sponsor)**

About Non-congregate Feeding Waiver:

“If you didn't have congregate eating, then you could serve a lot more. [The non-congregate feeding waiver] is the reason we can give out thousands of weekly boxes. If eating at the site was required, we couldn't handle that. We can't feed 1,000 kids at one site, but we can feed a lot of kids who are non-congregate.” **(Nonprofit sponsor)**

“Definitely, the non-congregate eating would make it that we could serve so many more kids than we usually do in the summer. In the summer usually, we have one site that can handle about 150 kids, and they have to eat there, and that's it.” **(Nonprofit sponsor)**

About Area Eligibility Waiver:

“We do have some small pockets of severe need within school zones...The eligibility of the school may only be 30 percent, but those 30 percents are some of the neediest of the needy in the county. [This year], we were able to open two schools accessible from two of the neediest small pockets within school zones that aren't eligible and provide meals to those people that ordinarily without that area eligibility waiver, we wouldn't be able to do.” **(Public school sponsor)**

About Parent/Guardian Meal Pickup Waiver:

“Parents and guardians coming in, that was clean cut. That was a savior because we didn't see kids coming out. It was the parent or guardian coming to get the meals” **(Public school sponsor)**

“We asked for feedback on the parent pickup waiver from our organizations. 'Would you use this?' A lot of people said, 'Yes.' That's one where I can say yes we heard from the community that was helpful for parents to be able to go pick up meals for their kids.” **(Nonprofit sponsor)**

About Mealtime Flexibility Waiver:

“The mealtime flexibility and especially the option to take meals off-site has just reduced so many barriers for children participating in summer meals.” **(Nonprofit sponsor)**

“In terms of giving out that seven-day box, normally you can't do that...the mealtime waiver that allows you to give out the seven-day box.” **(Nonprofit sponsor)**

References: (1) Harper, K., Lu, S. V., Gross, J., Obudulu, C., Wilson, M. J., & Gross, S. M. (2022). The Impact of Waivers on Summer Meal Participation in Maryland. *Journal of School Health*, 92(2), 157–166. (2) Harper et al., unpublished manuscript.

Research team: Y Ding (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health), S Lu (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health), K Harper (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health), J Gross (Maryland Hunger Solutions), MJ Wilson (Maryland Hunger Solutions), SM Gross (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health)