

AOE Testimony: Food Security

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Agriculture
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General AOE Child Nutrition Response to COVID-19

Maintaining safe food access for children whether in school, at child care, or at home has been a priority for the AOE since the beginning of the state's COVID response, and all 9 of the Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) team members have taken on new work in support of this mission. Immediately, the team began providing written guidance to the field on safe food service, requesting waivers from USDA to allow the programs to continue to operate, and processing the federally-required paperwork to allow all schools to continue to provide meals even though school buildings were closed. The team has continued that work since, creating more than 20 guidance documents, writing 38 waiver requests to USDA, conducting individual technical assistance calls with all 67 School Food Authorities in the state, and conducting numerous virtual trainings. Since March, 2 CNP team members have been assigned to the AOE's COVID response team, meeting twice daily to coordinate response activities.

As a result of all this work, over 8.3 million meals were served in Vermont between March and November 2020 using the federal child nutrition programs. This is an impressive number, given the extraordinary challenges faced by these programs. But it is slightly fewer meals than we would have expected to see served had programs operated normally during that time period. In a typical school year, we would serve 1.2 million meals per month. Schools report that when children are attending school in-person, or if the school is able to provide delivery of meals, then meal counts are much higher than normal. When children are attending school remotely and households must pick up meals from the school, meal counts are far lower than usual. Anecdotally, Vermont schools seem to have done a better job of keeping participation near normal levels than schools nationally.

The AOE CNP team has also managed two CRF grant programs created by the legislature for child nutrition providers. \$2,118,296 was distributed to schools and other summer meal sponsors to assist with continuing meal service over the summer months. \$3,851,846 was distributed to schools, childcares and other child nutrition providers to purchase supplies and equipment for use in COVID-19 meal distribution. These funds have been used to purchase meal packaging supplies, refrigeration equipment, and delivery vehicles to assist with COVID-related meal service. The team has also managed \$359,114 in additional funding and 333,850 pounds of additional food made available by USDA to the Vermont Foodbank through TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program), an existing federal food assistance channel. Finally, AOE has partnered with DCF to administer USDA's P-EBT benefit, discussed later in this testimony.

AOE CNP has also participated directly in the state's emergency response, with the State Director of Child Nutrition Programs assigned to co-lead the state's mass feeding group, and another team member providing significant administrative support to that group. This work has incorporated the state's child nutrition providers as an emergency response resource, with 22 school food service programs providing 302,058 of the 1,079,389 meals provided to homeless Vermonters housed in hotels through the General Assistance voucher program. This work has also engaged many schools as partners with the state and the Vermont Foodbank in distributing USDA's Farmers to Families Food boxes.

What Meal Service Looks Like During COVID-19

Using waivers from USDA, schools, childcares, and other non-profit organizations are able to provide free meals to all children 18 and under through June 30, 2021. Additional waivers allow non-congregate meals, adults to pick up meals on behalf of their children, meals to be taken off-site, weekend meals to be offered, and multiple days' worth of meals to be provided at one time. Flexibility from USDA also allows programs to provide meal kits consisting of ingredients for up to one week's worth of meals, instead of requiring individually packaged unitized meals.

Under state law, schools are required to provide meals to all attending children every school day. This means that Vermont schools are making meals available for free to all students whether they are learning remotely or in-person. Some schools have provided meal delivery, but most require households to pick up meals on remote learning days. Meal production during COVID is more labor intensive and expensive than in normal times, as meals must be individually packaged to send to classrooms or for home consumption. Anecdotally, many programs struggled to keep serving local and scratch made items, as the extra labor and logistics required to individually package items meant that they needed to rely more on purchased pre-packaged items.

Food Service Staff have been working non-stop since March, often in close quarters with other staff. If a school food service worker tests positive for COVID, it is likely that the rest of the food service staff in that school will be determined close contacts and need to quarantine. This has happened several times already, with meals needing to be brought in from neighboring schools until the staff is cleared to return to work. Maintaining enough staff to allow for adequate substitute coverage food service programs has always been a challenge, and it is even more of a challenge with some potential staff opting not to work given the risk of COVID exposure.

Pandemic EBT

In Spring 2020, AOE worked closely with the Department for Children and Families (DCF) to issue \$14 million in P-EBT benefits to households with children who would have been eligible for free or reduced price school meals under the National School Lunch Act, if not for the COVID-19 related school closures. P-EBT benefits are funds provided on an electronic benefit transfer card that a household may use to purchase food items at grocery stores, convenience stores, online retailers and farmers markets where 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits are accepted. These funds were originally provided by the federal government under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020. In Fall 2020, Congress extended P-EBT benefits for the entire 2020-21 school year. USDA did not issue guidance to state agencies on implementation until

mid-November. USDA must review and approve each state's implementation plan prior to the state starting to issue benefits. Vermont's plan was approved on Jan. 15, 2021. We estimate that this program will distribute \$29.6 million in P-EBT benefits to Vermont households for School Year 2020-21. Unfortunately, the individual household data required to implement these benefits is not collected or kept at the state level, requiring that individual schools aggregate and supply the data to the state before benefits can be issued. Because of these administrative hurdles, we do not expect the SY20-21 benefits to begin being issued until March 2021, although the benefits will be retroactive to September 2020.

Looking Forward

The COVID meal service waivers provided by USDA will expire at the end of June. Congress has allowed these waivers to continue through September 2021, so we are waiting to see whether the new administration will use that authority to do so. Food Service Programs and the households they serve have gotten used to many of the new flexibilities, so moving back to pre-pandemic style of meal service will likely be challenging. There will likely be a lot of interest in maintaining universal meals, although it may be difficult to find the necessary funding to do so in local school budgets once the special USDA funding ends.

Some food service programs have lost significant revenue over the past year because they normally rely on additional revenue from adult meals, a la carte sales and catering services. Those programs operated by schools that were mostly remote this fall are likely seeing the worst losses. While some programs have more revenue due to more free meals served, others are facing severe budget shortfalls.

The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) passed in December attempted to address some of the revenue losses faced by child nutrition programs. The bill included funding for school food service programs and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) sponsors who lost anticipated federal child nutrition reimbursement funds as a result of COVID-19. Schools would be eligible for 55% of the difference in federal child nutrition reimbursement received in Fall 2020 compared to Fall 2019. CACFP sponsors would be eligible for 55% of the difference in federal child nutrition reimbursement received in Spring 2020 compared to Spring 2019.

There are some constraints on the funds that mean this will likely need to be managed as a reimbursement grant. The impact will be variable. For some programs, it will be a significant amount of additional revenue. Others will receive nothing because they are now serving more meals at the "free" reimbursement rate due to USDA waivers, so they are receiving more federal reimbursement during COVID than before, even if revenue from other sources like paid meals, adult meals, a la carte, and catering has fallen.

USDA is required to issue guidance to state agencies on how to implement this funding within 30 days of enactment, and the state agency will be required to submit their plan for implementation to USDA within 30 days after that. As of 1/19/21, USDA has not issued guidance.