

The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program (Summer EBT)



The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program for Children (Summer EBT) offers an exciting opportunity to reduce childhood hunger in the summer by providing families whose children are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year additional resources to purchase food during the summer months. The permanent, nationwide Summer EBT Program is set to begin in summer 2024.

Summer EBT is a complement to the Summer Nutrition Programs, which support summer meals programs at sites in low-income communities or that serve primarily children from households with low incomes. These sites frequently combine educational, enrichment, and recreational activities with meals. Combined, Summer EBT and summer meals can help ensure that children's nutritional needs are met during summer vacation.

History of Summer EBT: Demonstration Projects

Summer EBT was initially funded through the Agriculture Appropriations Act of Fiscal Year 2010 (Public Law 111-80), which gave the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) the authority to test innovative methods to reduce food insecurity during the summer. USDA launched Summer EBT in 2011 as a demonstration project to test the impact of providing summer nutrition benefits through an EBT card to families with low incomes who had school-age children. In its first year, the program provided a debit card with a fixed dollar amount to 12,500 low-income families to purchase groceries during the summer months.

Due to the pilot project's success, Congress invested additional resources in Summer EBT through the annual appropriations process. The funding allowed USDA to increase the number of states participating and the number of children served. In 2018, Summer EBT grew to serve 300,000 children across eight states (Connecticut, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) and two Indian Tribal Organizations (the Cherokee Nation and the Chickasaw Nation).

In 2018, USDA released a request for applications to operate Summer EBT for three consecutive summers. The request prioritized new states, new projects, projects that demonstrated exemplary customer service, and projects that included the implementation of a statewide plan. Notably,

most of the states that had been included in Summer EBT in prior years were not chosen to participate. Funding was limited to two states (Michigan and Wisconsin), the Chickasaw Nation, and the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona. In 2019, USDA selected additional states and Tribes for the three-year programs to begin in summer 2020: Connecticut, Missouri, Oregon, and the Cherokee Nation (states and a Tribe that operated Summer EBT in 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted Summer EBT operations. Schools closed in the spring of 2020, and states pivoted from the Summer EBT demonstration projects to the Pandemic EBT Program. In summer 2020, Michigan was the only state able to provide Summer EBT. In summer 2021, the Pandemic EBT Program expanded to include summer months and no states participated from that point forward in the Summer EBT demonstration projects. Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) were not authorized to administer Pandemic EBT and were allowed to continue distributing benefits for the summer under the demonstration projects. From 2020 to 2023, three ITOs (The Chickasaw Nation, the Cherokee Nation, and the Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona) distributed Summer EBT benefits through the demonstration project funding.

At its peak in summer 2018, Summer EBT was serving 279,000 children, with \$8.4 million in benefits issued. Over the course of the demonstration projects, over 426,000 children were served.

A Permanent Summer EBT Program

In December 2022, Congress created a nationwide, permanent Summer EBT Program through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023. The new program builds on the success of the demonstration projects and the Pandemic EBT Program and is available to eligible children in addition to the meals offered through the Summer Nutrition Programs. The program starts providing benefits in summer 2024.

Lessons Learned From Summer EBT Demonstration Projects

2016 Evaluation of Summer EBT

A 2016 report¹ assessed Summer EBT. The report evaluated the impact of providing two different levels of monthly summer benefits (\$30 and \$60), as well as the different distribution models: a specific monetary value available for food purchases, similar to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), compared to benefits tied to specific food items, similar to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In the SNAP model, eligible households received a monthly benefit per child to purchase SNAP-eligible foods. In the WIC model, eligible households received one Summer EBT food package per child, per month.²

The evaluation found that participation in Summer EBT led to several positive results:

- **Reduced food insecurity:** By providing low-income households with a \$30 or \$60 per month, per child benefit, the most severe type of food insecurity (very low food security) was reduced by one-third, and food insecurity was reduced by one-fifth.
- **Improved nutrition:** Both the \$30 and \$60 monthly benefit levels led to an improvement in children's summertime nutritional intake, but children in households that received the \$60 benefit ate slightly more nutritious foods (fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) than those in the \$30 group.

- **High rates of participation:** More than 75 percent of households in the program redeemed some or all of their benefits. While both models were efficient at reaching families, those who participated in the project modeled after SNAP redeemed benefits at higher rates than those who were in the project that was modeled after WIC (95 percent versus 83 percent). This is likely due to the comparatively limited availability of WIC retailers and the simplicity of redeeming the benefit through SNAP.

2024 Evaluation of Summer EBT Projects

Two reports released in 2024 evaluated the last seven years of the program: The first report covered 2015 to 2018³, and the second covered 2019 to 2022.⁴ These reports differed from the 2016 evaluations of the demonstration projects in that they did not include an experimental design to evaluate the impact of the Summer EBT benefit. Instead, these reports evaluated the implementation and administration of the grants and examined patterns in household usage.

These reports found that parents and caregivers appreciated how Summer EBT helped fill nutritional gaps. They felt the program provided flexibility in where they could purchase food and gave families the ability to shift their purchasing toward more nutritious foods.

The [2015 to 2018 evaluation](#) found the following challenges and barriers:

- **Lack of awareness:** Some eligible families did not understand how to use their benefits or were not aware that they were eligible. Many families who participated through the WIC model were confused about utilizing their benefits. There were also card-related issues, such as issues activating cards or never receiving a card.
- **Staffing issues:** Administering agencies reported challenges with hiring and retaining staff from year to year. The new permanent Summer EBT Program allows states to hire year-round full-time staff, which is expected to mitigate staffing challenges.
- **Quality and availability of data:** Some agencies reported challenges in identifying eligible children and reconciling sometimes conflicting eligibility information from multiple

¹ Abt Associates Inc. (2016). Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/ops-sebt-summary.pdf>. Accessed on October 24, 2019.

² Ibid.

³ Abt Associates Inc. (2024). Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children Evaluation 2015–2018. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/ops-sebt-2015-2018-report.pdf>. Accessed on March 27, 2024.

⁴ Abt Associates Inc. (2024). Evaluation of the 2019–2022 Summer EBT Demonstration. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/ops-sebt-2019-2022-report.pdf>. Accessed on March 27, 2024.

data sources. Many agencies reported issues with card delivery and sending outreach materials as addresses were not always up to date.

- **Benefit use and delivery:** About 45 percent of benefit dollars issued were never redeemed between 2015 and 2018 across the demonstration programs. This was a result of how benefits were drawn down for families already on SNAP and the rollover of food packages for WIC.

The 2015 to 2018 evaluation made the following recommendations:

- **Diversify outreach techniques:** States should use diverse communication methods to reach families (newspapers, websites, press releases, radio announcements, social media, etc.), as well as tap schools to communicate with families. States should also remind families to redeem their benefits through robotext and robocalls.
- **Centralize data systems:** Compiling all household information from multiple data sources into one database eliminates the need to exchange student lists. This is a requirement for states who are implementing the permanent Summer EBT Program beginning in 2025.
- **Establish statewide/ITO-wide applications:** Collecting only the necessary information from families to determine program eligibility through a centralized system allows for more streamlined data processing and issuance. This will be a requirement for states and ITOs implementing Summer EBT beginning in 2025.
- **Provide flexibility in distributing benefits:** In situations where states are co-loading benefits on SNAP cards, Summer EBT benefits should be drawn down first. For WIC, benefits should be allowed to roll over from month to month for the summer. This can maximize the amount of time families have to utilize their benefits.

The [second report](#) looked at the Summer EBT demonstration projects from 2019 to 2022. The 2019 to 2022 evaluation found the following challenges and barriers when looking at ITO implementation:

- **Passive versus active consent:** The Chickasaw and Cherokee Nations both used a model of active consent, which required families to complete an application, whereas the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona utilized passive consent and automatically sent benefits to eligible families. Rates of participation were dramatically lower in the ITOs that required active consent.

- **Benefit redemption:** Families across all participating ITOs had to travel long distances to redeem their benefits, which created barriers for those with limited access to transportation. There was also confusion among participants about how to redeem benefits and limited flexibility when it came to food packages.

- **Participant experience:** Some families spoke of tradeoffs when it came to food quality and customer service in larger retail stores and smaller local stores. They also called out the lack of variety and flexibility in relation to the WIC food packages.

The 2019 to 2022 evaluation included recommendations for the new, permanent program:

- **Provide schools with training:** Success in the pilots correlated with strong relationships with schools. This can also be helpful to ensure families apply when needed. This relationship-building should include data sharing agreements between the state/ITO and schools.
- **Prioritize using schools as the main source of outreach for families:** Families often have strong relationships with their local schools and have a great deal of trust in them. Utilizing these existing relationships to disseminate information was found to be a very effective mode of outreach.
- **Expand access by using existing WIC-authorized retailers:** WIC is an established program with approved retailers. By providing training to approved retailers on Summer EBT-approved food package items and ensuring that retailers can provide in-store support to participants who do not understand how to utilize these benefits, ITOs can help to expand access for families.

Conclusion

Summer EBT offers an exciting opportunity to reduce summer hunger. Children need both summer programming and summer meals to return to school ready to learn. Summer EBT offers an important and additional way to ensure that families are able to purchase the food they need to keep hunger at bay when they lose access to the free and reduced-price school meals that they rely on during the school year. The Summer EBT demonstration projects helped reduce summer hunger, and the new nationwide program will be a game changer for millions of families across the country. The lessons learned from the demonstration projects can help inform program operations moving forward.