

Combating Food Insecurity During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Food security exists when people have access to enough food for an active, healthy life at all times. Estimates in 2018 showed that about 865,000 people in Missouri, or 14% of the state population, were struggling with food insecurity – and about a fourth of them were children.¹ Although food insecurity has declined over the past 10 years, it remains a persistent problem across the nation, especially among people of color and families with children.¹ The causal relationship between lack of food access and health is clear. Negative health outcomes related to childhood food insecurity include anemia, asthma, anxiety and depression, behavioral problems, and worse oral health.²

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many Missourians losing their jobs, thus making food budgets tighter. In the past 20 years, the nation's food insecurity rates peaked during the Great Recession at 14.6% nationwide and 16.7% in Missouri.³ It is projected that current levels of food insecurity are much higher than usual due to the economic crisis. In fact, some national estimates show over 25% of households with children are struggling with food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ State action to bolster food security during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic should include improvements to food assistance and school meal programs.

Approaches and Policy Considerations

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), has been effective at reducing food insecurity in the United States since its inception in 1939. Recent research shows that SNAP reduces the likelihood of food insecurity by roughly 30%.⁵ In order to be eligible for SNAP in Missouri, a household must make less than 130% of the federal poverty level, or about \$34,000 a year for a family of four.⁶ From February to August 2020, SNAP participation in Missouri increased by 115,000 people, as many turned to the program to feed their families during the economic downturn.⁷

Though some of the SNAP programs' rules and regulations are determined at the federal level, there are state-level administrative actions that could increase access to the program and decrease food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations for further regulatory changes in Missouri include:

- **Continue to maximize benefit amounts to meet the rising need for food assistance.** The Department of Social Services' Family Support Division (FSD) was approved for a waiver to provide maximum SNAP benefits to families in March 2020 and has renewed the waiver each month since. Providing maximum benefits increases the statewide average SNAP benefit per household from approximately \$260 to \$680.⁸⁻¹⁰ Continuing to renew this waiver and provide maximum benefits will help to feed Missourians through the public health and economic crisis.
- **Temporarily waive initial and recertification interview requirements.** Applicants for SNAP benefits are normally interviewed by FSD staff to clarify eligibility information, collect verification documents, and answer questions. In response to the pandemic and economic crisis, application and recertification interviews were waived from March to June of 2020.¹¹ Reports from FSD show that after the reinstatement of interviews in July, deflected calls to the agency – calls that are not answered due to high volume – increased from 1.7% to 63.5% of all calls. With the rise in deflected calls, many families are struggling to complete their required interview and may not have received benefits. Of more than 58,000 applications received in November, 44% of them were rejected, up from 27% in October.¹² In December, Missouri received federal approval to waive recertification interviews through June 2021, but interviews upon initial application are still required.¹³ Waiving all interview requirements through the remainder of the public health emergency would reduce administrative burden and remove bureaucratic red tape for food-insecure families.
- **Temporarily waive time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs).** Under federal law, if ABAWDs do not meet certain work requirements, they can only receive SNAP benefits for three months in a three-year period.¹⁴ Twenty-four states have been approved to waive this time limit if there is evidence that unemployment rates are over 10% or there is an insufficient number of jobs available in the area.^{15,16} Missouri, however, does not currently waive this

time limit. Though unemployment rates in Missouri have decreased slowly since the initial spike at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Missourians still struggle to find employment. As of November 2020, over 45,000 Missourians were unemployed, 2.5 times more people than the previous year.¹⁷ With unemployment still a persistent problem across the state, many ABAWDs may be unable to meet work requirements and thus be ineligible for benefits. Waiving the time limit would make SNAP available to more Missourians as they continue to search for work.

- **Reinstate pandemic electronic benefits transfer (P-EBT) funding for the 2020-2021 school year with retroactive payments for the first semester.** P-EBT was a one-time extra benefit of \$302 per child for families to cover meal costs when schools were closed from March to May of 2020.¹⁸ Families that were already enrolled in SNAP automatically received these benefits, making it much easier and faster to access the extra funds. Early reports show that the one-time payments kept 3-4 million children nationwide out of hunger.¹⁹ So far, there has been no subsequent benefit for the 2020-2021 school year. According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), 127 schools are currently participating in remote learning or have a hybrid in-person and remote schedule.²⁰ Students at these schools may not have been participating in school meals and may be eligible for a retroactive P-EBT benefit for the 2020-2021 school year. Reinstating these payments helps families cover meal costs while children are unable to receive school meals due to remote learning.

School meals are an important source of food for families with children. Since food insecure children are more likely to receive a larger proportion of their food intake at school than other children, school meals are vital for combating food insecurity. Through the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, schools can provide free or reduced-price lunch and breakfast to students who qualify. In 2019, 559,431 Missouri students participated in the school lunch program, but only 290,152 participated in school breakfast.²¹ Students who eat both breakfast and lunch at school have better overall diet quality, positive health outcomes, and improved academic performance.²² With many schools closing or transitioning to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, getting school meals to children is more difficult. According to DESE, in October 2019, over 6 million school lunches were provided across the state, with 66% served for free or at a reduced price.²³ In October 2020, only 3.8 million school lunches were provided, but more than 88% were free or reduced price.²⁴

Since the beginning of the pandemic, DESE has been approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) to make temporary changes to school meal programming that increase access to meals for children. Beyond the current public health emergency, the state could take additional steps to ensure food security for children, including:

- **Financial support for statewide alternative breakfast programs, like Breakfast After the Bell (BATB).** Increasing breakfast participation in schools is necessary to improve student well-being and learning capacity. Barriers to school breakfast include stigma, cost, and arriving too late to school.²⁵ Alternative breakfast programs offer meals at more convenient times and locations that allow more students to eat at school. Schools that offer alternative breakfast options are 1.9 times more likely to have high breakfast participation among students, but only 44% of Missouri schools use BATB programming.²⁶ BATB programs include breakfast in the classroom, grab and go breakfast, and second chance breakfast. Start-up costs can be a barrier for schools to implement a BATB program. To mitigate this, the state could incentivize BATB programming by allocating funds for qualifying schools to develop plans and programs of their own. With financial support, more schools would be likely to use BATB and see increased breakfast participation.
- **Guidance to qualifying schools to participate in community eligibility.** Community eligibility (CE) is a process by which schools can provide free meals to all students if 40% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced-price meals.²⁷ Schools can participate in CE without requiring students to apply and are reimbursed by the federal government at rates determined by estimates of the number of low-income children in the school.^a This reduces the administrative burden for schools and increases participation rates for school meals. A study of Pennsylvania and Maryland schools found that CE improved school meal participation overall.²⁸ In Missouri, schools that participate in community eligibility are 2.2 times more likely to have high breakfast participation.²⁶ Currently, 47.4% of eligible school districts participate in CE in Missouri.^b

Endnotes available upon request

^a More information on how reimbursement rates are determined can be found at the USDA's Community Eligibility Provision Resource Center: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nsip/community-eligibility-provision-resource-center>

^b A list of Missouri schools participating in CE can be found on DESE's website: <https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/FNS-EligibleorPotentiallyEligibleLEAsforCEP.pdf>