Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Hunger Goes Virtual: The Importance of School Meals as Classrooms Stay Closed

Health Equity

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The sound of feet running, doors slamming, and cries for entertaining activities are the new form of background noise for many working caregivers across the country as they navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Days once filled with long hours of work, office noises, and perhaps even silence are now comprised of video calls, virtual parent-teacher conferences, and for more than 11% of the population, a call to the unemployment hotline. These challenges culminate in an ever-growing portion of people in the United States who are now facing another new reality: empty pantries, bare refrigerators and dwindling resources to fill either for their family.

Throughout the United States, 22 million low-income children depend on the National School Breakfast and Lunch Program (NSLP) as the primary source of their nutrition. In Philadelphia, an area of community eligibility, these meals are a free, dependable resource for all students. When life as we knew it came to a halt in mid-March and schools closed, families abruptly lost this support. Recognizing this, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) took action to ensure children continued receiving meals by issuing waivers to increase availability of meals in remote settings and to provide flexibility on how and when food could be given to children. These waivers allowed for widespread distribution of meals to kids in Philadelphia across nearly 400 sites, including five sites at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, despite school closures and virtual learning formats. Up until Monday, August 31, the future of these waivers remained unclear and many summer meal programs teetered on unstable ground.

Fortunately, last week the USDA announced it would extend several waivers through the end of 2020. This decision will help ensure accessible meals for children nationwide, despite the shifting status of their school's learning model, which is crucially important as throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has affected nearly 35% of U.S families. Coupled with persistent school closures and deepening food access challenges, these issues all highlight the importance of changing policy rapidly to meet the needs of our nation's children and families. With their latest decision, the USDA recognized the importance of flexible meal programs to do just that.

Specifically, this extension allows for summer meal programs to continue throughout the fall with discretionary distribution methods that didn't exist in the past. Previously, programs had to operate with more restrictive time limits, on-site eating requirements, and a paired activity, and may have excluded children who have become eligible throughout the pandemic. Now meal distributors can expand their operating hours, allowing them to adhere to social distancing guidelines, and can offer meals to all children. This flexibility carries on for schools that are entirely virtual, or still unsure of how the reopening process will go. As the School District of Philadelphia continues to plan for remote or hybrid learning days, they have the ability to ensure that students are fed even if they aren't in the classroom. No matter where learning occurs, children deserve consistent meals.

The USDA's decision also extended the fresh fruit and vegetable program so that any funds rolling over from the previous school year can be attributed toward these nutritious items. Aside from opening up funds and sponsoring diverse, healthy meals, the waivers also alleviate an immense administrative burden on school nutrition staff. With local regulations constantly shifting to maintain the safety of children and staff, these waivers secure accessible meal options for children in all circumstances.

Extending these waivers was a critical step for the health and safety of children nationwide. Now, summer food programs and school nutrition teams are rapidly working to continue their programs and keep food on the table—whether that be in a classroom, day care, park or a family's newfound shared working space. While these waivers were extended through the end of December, anti-hunger advocates are already working to encourage the USDA to extend waivers to the end of the school year.

To check on meal distribution sites in the Philadelphia area, Philly.gov provides a list of free meal locations throughout the city.

As families face so much uncertainty, there is a breath of relief that funding for our nation's food service programs remains secure, at least for another few months.

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