

Access to Healthy Food for Young Children Act of 2021

Every day, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) serves nutritionally sound meals and snacks to more than 3 million of our youngest children through child care centers, day care homes and Head Start. CACFP plays a critical role in educating children, families and child care providers about healthy nutrition and providing resources for at-risk children to eat healthy meals. For many young children, the meals they eat in child care programs are the most nutritious meals they eat all week. As working families shuttle between home, child care and work, little time remains for food shopping, healthy meal planning and sitting down to eat healthy meals. CACFP helps to support the children of working parents who rely on child care to ensure their children are safe and healthy while they work to support their families. However, CACFP participation has been dropping and the program is overdue for improvements. The Access to Healthy Food for Young Children Act is a comprehensive approach to improving both CACFP and early childhood nutrition.

Allow child care centers and homes the option of serving a fourth meal service for children who are in care for 8 or more hours.

Many children are in care for more than eight hours per day as their parents work long hours to make ends meet, so they rely on child care providers to meet a majority of their nutrition needs. For children who are in care for 8 or more hours per day, allowing child care centers and homes the option to serve a fourth meal service (typically an additional snack or supper at the end of the day) would help ensure providers can meet critical nutrition needs throughout the long hours that a child may spend in care.

Reduce the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) area eligibility test from 50 percent to 40 percent to streamline access to healthy meals for young children in child care.

Currently, family child care homes only qualify for area eligibility in areas with 50 percent or more low-income children (as defined by local census data or the percentage of children in the local school eligible for free and reduced price meals). The threshold is too high to appropriately target many communities with struggling families. Reducing the area eligibility test to a 40 percent threshold would make many more child care providers who serve low-income children eligible for the higher Tier I reimbursement, and many more children in need would receive healthy CACFP meals and snacks.

Increase CACFP reimbursements for child care centers and family child care providers by 10 cents per child per meal per tier, and base both reimbursement rates on the Consumer Price Index for Food Away from Home to stem participation declines and improve nutrition.

Research has shown that increasing reimbursements directly improves the nutritional value of foods served in family child care, while lowering reimbursements decreases the availability of fruits and vegetables and increases the percent of energy from total fat and saturated fat. Higher reimbursements will assure that more children participate in CACFP, both attracting more child care centers and helping to stem the loss of family child care providers.

Authorize the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Paperwork Reduction to ensure the continuation of the Congressionally-mandated USDA CACFP paperwork reduction initiative including a focus on maximizing the effective use of technology.

Through the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Paperwork Reduction, USDA would continue to reduce unnecessary or duplicative paperwork resulting from regulations and recordkeeping requirements for State agencies, institutions, family and group day care homes, and sponsored centers participating in the program. The Advisory Committee would provide recommendations to reduce paperwork in CACFP, while ensuring that accountability and program integrity are maintained.

Cut red tape for child care centers serving low-income families by creating a “Provision 2” streamlining option for CACFP.

“Provision 2” would allow child care centers that predominantly serve low-income children to offer free meals to all children for a 4-year period, without obtaining additional applications (like the same option in the school meal programs). In CACFP, “Provision 2” child care centers would use the existing blended rate formula to establish reimbursement claiming percentages in the first year. Creating a “Provision 2” option for CACFP is a low-cost way to simplify center meal counting and claiming procedures, and reduce application burdens for parents.

Establish a new Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) pilot project within CACFP.

Within the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), CEP allows high poverty schools to offer school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students, if 40 percent or more of the students are categorically eligible for free meals. CEP has transformed the school nutrition programs, increasing access and significantly reducing administrative work for schools and families. Currently, no equivalent provision exists for CACFP. This pilot would allow up to 6 states to carry out a CEP pilot in coordination with a selected sponsoring organization and one or more eligible child care centers.

Provide \$5 million per year to support nutrition training and technical assistance under CACFP and to increase participation in the program of children from underserved communities.

These funds would allow USDA to continue to support the successful implementation and of the improved meal pattern and increase CACFP participation. Appropriate training and technical assistance under CACFP is essential in order to support health meal access for participating children. Additionally, these funds would help increase CACFP participation within underserved communities.