



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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COVID-19: Feeding Kids During the Pandemic | April 20, 2020 | OAS Episode 91

Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. On this podcast, we’re all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith. Thanks for joining us.

This podcast is one in the series NCSL is producing to focus on how states are taking action in response to the corona virus pandemic. The podcasts and a new webinar series look at public health responses, workplace issues, education and childcare, the economy, elections, continuity of government, and more. You can find links for these webinars and view archive versions, along with links to a wide range of other resources, at www.ncsl.org/coronavirus.

Today’s podcast started with a simple question: How are we feeding the 22 million children who get free or reduced-cost meals every day at school? To help answer it, we’re first talking with Carolyn Vega, senior manager for Share Our Strengths No Kid Hungry campaign, who offers a national perspective on what states are doing and can do.

Our second guest is Montana Representative Moffie Funk, who gives a state-level perspective, especially on the challenges of getting meals to children in rural areas.

Carolyn, welcome to “Our American States.”

Vega: Thank you so much for having me. It’s an honor to be here and be able to share information with you today.

Time Marker (TM): 01:38

Ed: Carolyn, with 22 million children receiving meals through their schools, what’s the single most important thing states and school districts can do to ensure they’re still being fed?

Vega: The most important thing that states and school districts can do is to take advantage of all of the child nutrition options made available through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and U.S. Department of Agriculture waivers and guidance.

These will allow for stronger and more widespread implementation of critical programs that bring federal dollars to states at a time when we know state and local budgets are strained.

TM: 02:15

Ed: So, what steps are states and school districts taking around the nation to try to be sure that those kids get fed?

Vega: So, at a state level, state agencies administering the child nutrition programs are opting into waivers and in some cases submitting additional waiver requests to make it easier to operate the federal programs in these unprecedented circumstances.

So, before the Families First Coronavirus Response Act passed, all states requested and received a waiver that allowed schools and nonprofits to serve meals through the summer meals programs outside of the usual group settings that were required for these programs. So, you may hear people talk about a non-congregate waiver and that's what that was.

And so, there are now more options available through 12 nationwide waivers. Some have been implemented by more states than others, but in general these waivers allow for non-congregate service and other flexibilities that are really critical to make these programs work right now.

That also includes options to have non-congregate service through the national school lunch program and the school breakfast program. So, that is an option for schools implementing online learning that don't qualify for summer meals programs.

As a reminder, summer meals programs are targeted to areas where more than half of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. There are some options to qualify if you close your program to serve a more targeted group of low-income students, but by and large most sites are usually the ones that are operating in low-income areas where half of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Some states have been requesting waivers from the area eligibility requirement, so that opens up the summer meals programs to more fully served communities in areas that weren't eligible before. And this is really critical, because we know that millions more families are struggling right now. So, last year's data doesn't really reflect the need now.

And then at a district level, they're implementing the summer meals programs or the other child nutrition programs, working with their states on their plans and implementing fees waivers and flexibilities to make sure that the kids are fed.

TM: 04:27

Ed: So, most of these school food program decisions are taking place at the local level. Are there programs that the state can utilize to reach affected children in all parts of the state?

Vega: That's a great question. So, again, it's the state agency that's electing to use these nationwide waivers and requesting additional waivers and offering clear and simple guidance on implementation to really support local operators and districts across the state. But you're right – it's really up to school districts and other approved nonprofits to decide whether or not to operate right now.

In order to really reach kids across the state, a great option is Pandemic EBT, which was authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, and that does allow states to reach all kids who are eligible for free- or reduced-price school meals.

There's also Coronavirus for Response SNAP, or CR-SNAP, and that's another great option because we know that entire households are struggling right now, not just kids. And along with that, it may be important for states to implement administrative flexibility so that people don't have to apply for SNAP in person right now. And states may also need additional staff or contractors to help process the flood of applications.

TM: 04:27

Ed: So, you mentioned the Families First Coronavirus Response Act that was signed into law last month, and that established this Pandemic EBT that you mentioned. Can you explain how the program works and are there some states where we can take some best practices?

Vega: Yes. So, we're really grateful that this option passed in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act because we think it's a really critical piece of the response, although at the moment as of our recording today, only Michigan and Rhode Island have had their plans approved.

So, we're a little early on to start identifying best practices, but we do know more states are applying and we encourage states to work on those plans to get them approved because, again, this is such a critical piece of support to kids and families right now.

When it comes to preparing a plan for those states that have not done that yet, it requires a partnership between the agency that administers SNAP in your state and the Child Nutrition Program state agency.

And they'll need to figure out how much money each child and family will get, and that's a formula based on the number of children in the household, the reimbursement rate for the meals they would have received had they been in school, the number of days that schools are closed, and then also thinking about what their end date is and how many months this is going to go on. Again, we know a lot of states have closed schools through the end of the school year.

We encourage states when they're developing their plan to include things like an after-school snack or maybe even an after-school meal. We know most states are assuming a breakfast and a lunch are the meals that children would have received at school, but we also know that many schools across states, especially those who have lots of low-income students, are offering after-school snacks and meals.

Data sharing is also a really critical piece of these plans. So, again, the SNAP agency needs to work with the Child Nutrition Program agency to get that critical information about who is eligible for free- or reduced-price school meals.

And then for the families that did not participate in SNAP before, they'll need to receive EBT cards so that they can actually take that and go to the grocery store and buy food.

Ed: Well, I'm glad you mentioned the date, because I have tried to make a practice during these corona virus podcasts of mentioning when we're doing the recording and you and I are talking today on April 15th. Sadly, many of these things have changed rather rapidly, so I want to make sure listeners know that.

TM: 08:04

Ed: I think everybody has seen that schools and other organizations have tried to transition to a meal delivery or pickup system. Can you tell us a little bit how that works?

Vega: So, for schools and other sites that are able to operate as open summer meal sites, and again, those are the locations where at least half the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, or where they've been able to receive a waiver from that area eligibility requirement, those open sites can serve two meals per day to any child age 18 or under. And when I say any child, I mean even kids who aren't enrolled students at that school or even within the district.

Maybe it's a student's younger sibling, or a child who is homeschooled, or attended a charter school that's not serving meals right now, and also the kids themselves don't have to prove that they're personally eligible for free or reduced-price meals. And the schools and sites operating as open sites don't have to track that. They just record the total meals served.

Now, for schools that don't qualify as open sites through the summer meals program, they may be distributing meals to a more limited group as what's called a closed enrolled summer meal site, or they may be serving meals through the national school lunch and school breakfast programs, and in that case they may be limiting their meals to enrolled students.

Of the meals that can be served, those two meals are typically a breakfast and a lunch. That really maximizes the federal funding that schools and organizations are able to get. And organizations are typically able to distribute both of those meals at the same time with the flexibility that they have with nationwide waivers. And states may also approve sites to distribute meals for multiple days at the same time up to a week at a time.

USDA recently released guidance that clarified that schools and other sites may be able to serve an additional meal and snack each day by adding on another child nutrition program, the child and adult care food program's at risk after school meals component.

So, the CACFP at risk after school component is limited to areas where at least half of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals and, to date, there are no waivers from that requirement to my knowledge. But still, that would allow for schools and other sites to serve three meals and a snack for every child every day.

TM: 10:30

Ed: Somebody has to put these meals together and distribute them and that kind of thing. What kind of flexibility do school districts have to deal with the staffing and trying to avoid having too many people getting together in one place?

Vega: That's a great question. Safety is such a critical factor right now. So, we've seen about four different models for meal distribution and within each one, there are safety measures that schools can take.

So, the general models that we've seen are curbside or drive-through distribution in areas where most people drive, walk-up distribution in more urban areas or more walkable areas. Delivery along bus routes or mobile routes is another option, and then home delivery.

For example, with the curbside or drive-through distribution, we've seen schools ask that families pop their trunk and they put the meals directly in the trunk without having to personally interact or touch or hand off that meal to that family.

For places that are doing more of that walk-up distribution or where you're not able to put a meal directly into a car trunk, we see schools putting tape or chalk marks or traffic cones on the ground to make sure that families are staying six feet apart as they wait. And they're putting meals on a table, stepping back from that table, having each family come forward to collect their meal, moving on, before they put out the next set of meals.

So, things like bus route delivery and mobile routes can be really great, especially where kids and families may have transportation difficulties. It allows schools and organizations to take the meals to the families. But even there, it's important to think about how you're going to be able to do distancing once you get to that point for distribution.

We've seen schools bring a table along in that bus, set up the table and, again, have families wait six feet apart, come up to the table and take their meal. So, they are choosing spots where they do have a parking lot or a space to wait and this can be really important because even if fewer people are coming to each distribution point or each bus stop, you don't want to have multiple people waiting and crowding there.

And then home delivery can be a great option. Currently that's only available to schools because they have to get families to opt in and confirm that they want that delivery and that it's okay to come to their home. But that obviously allows for less contact even still.

And USDA has confirmed that the kid doesn't have to be present when you do home delivery, and if the meals are shelf stable, then no one even has to be home; you can just leave the food and go.

But related to that issue of the kid having to be there, USDA does have a waiver that allows parents to pick up meals on behalf of their children. So, that's another great option for states and schools to implement because that reduces the number of people that are coming to each site to pick up meals.

TM: 13:22

Ed: So, there have been reports from school districts on this staff question of a shortage of staff to operate the programs. Do you know ways that schools are trying to deal with that?

Vega: We know some schools are pulling in school administrators and coaches and after-school program staff and others that typically don't work in food service to help. And those other school staff typically have the background checks and other approvals that they would need to distribute meals and interact directly with kids and families.

Other options are distributing meals to sites run by other organizations or partnering with other organizations to be able to distribute meals in more locations. And then another option for schools and districts that really are getting desperate and can't find enough staff is to work with a vendor or food service management company.

Currently, the federal laws do allow for simplified emergency procurement. So, it can be important at a state level just to confirm that that's okay and to offer clear information about what requirements need to be met from the state perspective on doing emergency procurement.

TM: 14:29

Ed: Well, I'd better ask you about the money question because with all these extra precautions and costs that we've discussed, I've got to wonder how financially sustainable some of these programs are. And in addition to that, can you tell our listeners where they can go to help support these programs?

Vega: Yes, thank you. This is a really tough time for school nutrition departments and other organizations providing food and meals to kids and families.

Even for schools that are able to get the free meals reimbursement rate for all meals served through the summer meals programs, they still have those higher costs for staff, for safety gear, meal packaging and supplies, for transportation for delivery. And many aren't able to serve as many meals as they were before because they don't have that built-in audience of students at school every day.

And they may not be able to serve at all of their schools because of that area eligibility issue. Plus, they're losing out on other sources of revenue like concession stands, a-la-carte sales, meals that staff pay for, catering operations.

So, again, all around it really is a tough time financially for these schools.

Some things that we've seen states implement to help – we know Utah is using their state liquor tax revenue to supplement the federal meal reimbursement rate. We also know of some states using state revenue to run school buses to support delivery.

We also think that there are opportunities with the Cares Act that provided emergency funding relief for state education expenses, that some of that funding could be used to help school

nutrition departments. They are generally expected to operate independent of school district general funds, but as they run out of money, if schools and districts do want to continue providing meals, which are a really critical resource at this time, they may need to dip into district education funds if that would continue.

And we've also seen schools implement partnerships or get private funding to do things like provide food boxes for families, or to be able to do adult meals to offer additional support.

Obviously, No Kid Hungry, we are committed to helping these organizations on the front lines right now with emergency relief grants as we're able to provide funding, so we would appreciate any support to be able to continue doing that so that these schools and organizations can get the vans that they need to deliver meals to families or the other equipment that they really need to operate right now where additional staff is needed.

TM: 16:54

Ed: So, Carolyn, our audience primarily is legislators and legislative staff. As we wrap up, is there anything you'd like to say to them about what steps they could take, additional steps they could take to make sure kids are getting fed?

Vega: I would really encourage all state legislators to get in touch with their state agencies that operate these child nutrition programs and SNAP to make sure that they have all of the resources that they need, and that they are taking full advantage of all of these flexibilities, and to offer any additional support that they're able to these school nutrition employees and child nutrition program operators who are on the front lines doing heroes' work right now.

Ed: Well, Carolyn, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us about this critical topic. I wish you the very best and stay safe.

We'll be right back with our interview with Representative Moffie Funk of Montana.

MUSIC

Ed: Welcome back. Now we're going to speak with Representative Moffie Funk of Montana about efforts in her state to ensure children are being fed during this pandemic. Representative Funk, welcome to "Our American States."

Funk: Oh, thank you so much and I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you. NCSL has done an extraordinary job of getting information out to us during this very challenging time and also, if I may, a big shoutout to No Kid Hungry – they have done an extraordinary job here in Montana. It's a public/private partnership between our Department of Public Health and Human Services and the national nonprofit. They have managed to get several grants. They have just done an extraordinary amount of excellent work during this time.

TM: 18:52

Ed: Well great, thank you for that. Now we know there are more than 20 million children nationwide getting free or reduced-price meals through their schools. What's the situation in Montana?

Funk: Well, that number is increasing, as it probably is nationwide. We have one in six, so about 39,000 kids that are eligible for the free and reduced, but this number is growing.

One school district started off a couple of weeks ago. They were delivering about \$1,600 meals. And now it's up to 3,000. And that is partly due to the waivers that have been implemented giving some flexibility so that it doesn't have to just be the free and reduced kids. It can also be districts with economic hardship, food insecurity. So, we've been able to reach more children, which is very important.

TM: 19:48

Ed: Absolutely, good news. Montana, of course, is one of the most rural states in the U.S. What sort of challenge does that pose in terms of getting food to kids?

Funk: Well, that's an excellent question. The definition of rural is, of course, all relative. We think we have some big cities of 35,000, but that's small in many parts of our nation. But yes, that is definitely a great challenge.

Also, in Montana, 30 of our 56 counties are considered food deserts, so it's not just a matter of getting food to the kids that are spread out, but it's also a matter of getting food, and that has been one of our greatest challenges.

There has been a great reliance on teachers and volunteers to help deliver food. Also, our rural areas are more challenged for technology and one thing that we have been able to do here in Montana is the use of transportation dollars to school districts. That has been broadened so that the buses are taking the learning to the kids, and they're also taking food.

So, we're able to do that, but many of our districts are having to increase the number of bus routes and their transportation dollars are getting stretched thin.

TM: 21:11

Ed: So, that's sort of anticipated my next question, which is what sort of strategies you're using. It sounds like the buses are one approach you're taking. Are there other approaches you're using in Montana to try to get food out to the kids?

Funk: Montana is very much a local-control state. So, every district is doing it the way that they feel best serves their kids. So, there is delivery through buses, which also deliver the technology and the learning.

Larger districts mostly have pickup sites for once-a-day or twice-a-day lunch and breakfast. They're also working with food pantries and other resources to give dinners and snacks. And the waiver is allowing for bulk meals, which is reducing some of the risk and increasing efficiency.

It's very difficult knowing that you're delivering food to a home where there are other hungry people.

TM: 22:10

Ed: We know that around the country staffing has been a problem. What kind of situation are you facing in Montana? Is it different from one district to another?

Funk: Yes, but it is definitely a challenge and growing more so because, as I'm sure is true throughout the country, many of the people who work in the food services in our schools are older, or they're parents, and the older people have to weigh the risk because they are in the higher-risk category of continuing to work, and then many parents are now having to stay home to be with their kids.

We're having a hard time recruiting staff. It's a fairly high-risk job to have.

Ed: Yes, absolutely.

Funk: And so, we are definitely facing the challenges with that.

TM: 22:55

Ed: Now, last month the Families First Coronavirus Response Act was signed. How did that help Montanans?

Funk: Well, one of the best things was all those waivers. We were able to use the waivers to increase it so that it wasn't just the free and reduced, but it was economic hardship. The use of the dollars provides us with much more flexibility, which also is excellent. And there is more school money for food.

We did here in Montana... obviously, we kept the A&B funding for our students; that's the money that the state gives to each student. But all these monies are coming in. They're going to be distributed based on Title 1 formulas, but also with the flexibility to help schools that don't quite need that Title 1, but definitely need the help in providing food and services.

TM: 23:50

Ed: So, how is that going? We know that the cost of trying to get these meals produced and then delivered has increased costs in a lot of places. Is that true for Montana and is there any action at the state level to try to help subsidize that?

Funk: Unfortunately, there is not anything being done substantively, but it's definitely going to be a subject that comes up at our next meeting, I think. This I think was an unanticipated expense because with so much being delivered, a lot of the funds are running out because of the cost of containers: paper bags to put the lunches in, containers for individual portions.

We want to do more than just give sandwiches, and so the need for containers has really eaten up a lot of people's food budget. The USDA regulations about bulk buying – fortunately on some

of those we did get a waiver and are able to use some bulk buying. Some districts are trying to do bulk meals so that they can provide one-stop food for several days.

TM: 24:59

Ed: Let me ask you... I know Montana has a pretty significant Native American population. How are those folks doing? How are they affected and what kind of services are they able to get?

Funk: Again, just like everywhere, every district is very different. These communities are all unique. But oh, my goodness, they are pulling together and working so hard to provide for the kids and for the whole community, but especially for the kids.

It's been really extraordinary what they are doing. They have a lot of food programs. They're getting DPHHS – our Department of Health and Human Services is working very hard to make sure they have all the resources available, that they know what's out there.

They are relying more, I think, on some of the food pantries and some of the other ways to access food and supplies. But the distances on our reservations are, of course, very challenging and, again, that need for containers – some of our districts are increasing the bus routes so that they can get to kids more. They're also trying to deliver learning to the kids.

TM: 26:08

Ed: Now, Representative, as I think you know, our audience is primarily legislators and legislative staff and I wanted to ask you if there's anything else as we wrap up that you'd like to share with your colleagues around the nation.

Funk: This pandemic has really shown a very bright light on an issue that I think we have faced for a long time, and that is hunger in our nation. And I would hope that we don't go back to the old ways. It's a monumental issue across our nation and I think we must exert every effort to ensure that all the programs that we are getting in place now, all the work that we are doing now, that we build on that and don't just go back to same old same old.

This is truly an opportunity to move forward with increasing children's access to food, and this is a moment in my estimation that is extraordinarily powerful in moving forward and not going back to just the old ways.

Ed: Well, Representative, thank you so much for your time and for your perspective. And stay safe.

And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."

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