

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

July 14, 2020

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Food Benefits Available to Children Who Qualify for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals; But Window to Apply Closes on July 15

Advocacy Groups Call on Federal Leaders to Expand Benefits

(OAKLAND, CA)—A federal COVID-relief program, Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), is providing food benefits for children who qualify to receive free and reduced-price school meals and whose schools closed due to the coronavirus. Now, advocates are calling on federal leaders to extend and expand the program through the summer and throughout the course of the crisis.

“Until schools and child care facilities are fully, safely reopened, California kids are at even greater risk of going hungry,” said Tia Shimada, California Food Policy Advocates’ Director of Programs. “Right now, Pandemic EBT provides a one-time benefit. But child hunger is not a one-time problem. From hunger to unemployment to the illness itself, COVID-19 continues to harm families across our state. P-EBT can help -- and our leaders have a responsibility to make sure it does.”

The Pandemic EBT program was enacted through the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act to help nourish students while schools are closed in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. California has the nation’s [highest rate of child poverty](#) and more than 3.8 million children in the state are eligible for P-EBT. These children are eligible for up to \$365 in food benefits through P-EBT.

“Half of all students attending public school in San Diego County rely on free or reduced-price meals to make ends meet,” said Amanda Schultz Brochu, Senior Director of Programs for the San Diego Hunger Coalition. “We have heard from families what an incredible support P-EBT has been; however, these same families have also expressed a sincere need for additional support. Ensuring that families can put food on the table allows children and parents alike to focus their attention on staying healthy and safe and continuing to learn.”

As of June 15, P-EBT benefits have been mailed to more than 3 million children in California, [with an estimated \\$1.1 billion in benefits made available](#). Given ongoing need and the stark [rise in food insecurity](#) since the onset of COVID-19, advocates are calling for P-EBT to be extended and expanded alongside other critical anti-hunger investments such as a temporary boost to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, known commonly as food stamps or CalFresh in California).

“We’ve experienced more than a 50% increase in CalFresh application assistance since the beginning of this emergency,” said Liz Gomez, Director of Clients Services for Alameda County Community Food Bank. “Pandemic EBT has made a significant difference for families with children during the time when things were already hard financially and, yet, they got even worse. Furthermore, at a time when food banks are operating at unprecedented levels, P-EBT is giving households the ability to shop for food they need and food banks can extend their resources to serve more people.”

Unlike many COVID-relief efforts that shut out immigrant families, Pandemic EBT is available to eligible children regardless of immigration status. The benefits do not count against immigrants for the purposes of a public charge test, which is used in determining eligibility for green cards and other types of visas. This is critical in California, where [nearly half of all children have immigrant parents](#).

“The case for expanding Pandemic EBT could not be clearer,” said Cynthia Buiza, Executive Director, California Immigrant Policy Center. “For children in immigrant and mixed-status households in particular, the program is a lifeline to keep food on the table during a pandemic when the doors to so many other forms of assistance are closed. Many immigrant families have historically been excluded from basic supports such as Medi-Cal (Medicaid) and CalFresh (SNAP), and the federal emergency response has exacerbated this exclusion in multiple ways, including carving out immigrant taxpayers from eligibility for the stimulus payments. Expanding P-EBT for students, including students in immigrant households, is one simple way for the state of California to begin to close the gaps in our social safety net that leave out so many Californians.”

Advocates also want the Pandemic-EBT expanded to young kids in child care and early learning programs. Many of California’s youngest children also lost access to free or reduced-price meals served in these settings, but remain ineligible for P-EBT.

The window to apply for Pandemic EBT benefits closes on July 15. Families with eligible children who still need to apply should sign up at <https://ca.p-ebt.org/en/> as soon as possible. [Click here](#) for more information on the Pandemic-EBT program. Other resources include [CDSS P-EBT page](#) and the [Five Things to Know about Pandemic EBT in California guide](#).

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About California Food Policy Advocates: California Food Policy Advocates is a statewide policy and advocacy organization dedicated to improving the health and well-being of low income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable food. Learn more at www.cfpa.net