

Providing Meals and Nutrition Services During COVID-19 Webinar FAQs

1) **Q: What funds are currently available to support meals and nutrition services for Head Start grantees?**

A: Grantees have several options for paying for meals and nutrition services.

- **U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimbursement:** Head Start grantees may be reimbursed by USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) for meals and nutrition services provided to children enrolled in a center-based or family child care setting, regardless of whether children are currently served in-person or remotely/virtually. Grantees can also receive USDA reimbursement for the meals and snacks provided to children served in the home-based option during group socializations in a licensed facility.
- **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and supplemental funds for COVID-19 response:** Head Start grantees can use their CARES Act and supplemental COVID-19 response funds to provide enrolled children with meals and snacks not reimbursed by USDA. Grantees can also use these funds for the equipment and supplies necessary to support the delivery of nutrition services, regardless of whether children are served in person, remotely/virtually, or in a hybrid model. For example, programs can use these funds to purchase vans to deliver meals to children, refrigerators and supplies to store and seal the meals, and for other expenses associated with meal and nutrition services that are not reimbursed by USDA.

Based on data reported in November 2020 about their projected use of CARES Act funds, grantees plan to spend just 2% of their awards on meals and snacks not reimbursed by USDA. We remind grantees that all COVID-19 response funds can be used to support meals and nutrition services for enrolled children and, in some cases, families.

- **Operational funds:** Grantees always have the option of using their operational funds for expenses associated with meals and nutritional services that are not reimbursed by USDA.

2) **Q: Our local school districts are providing meals for all children 18 years and younger. Can we offer meals to our distance learners?**

A: Yes. Whether or not local school districts are offering meals for all children under 18, Head Start and Early Head Start programs can provide meals to distance learners.

We encourage grantees to assess families' nutritional and broader needs more frequently during the 2020–2021 program year. For example, the Head Start child's family may find the local school district's free meal pick-up protocol challenging due to transportation or location issues. This is absolutely a place where the Office of Head Start (OHS) can step in to make sure the family's needs are met. Head Start programs can provide meal delivery to the home or offer food box pick-up from a location closer to the family's home.

3) Q: Our Head Start program has not been providing food to families because we no longer have kitchen staff to help. How can we support our children's nutrition needs without staff to gather or cook food?

A: We know programs have made changes to their staffing plans to support the delivery of services during the pandemic. While some programs are currently operating in the virtual or remote setting, kitchen staff can still work in person at the Head Start or Early Head Start center.

We encourage programs to continue to be creative. Staff who cannot work in their traditional roles may temporarily work to support meals and nutritional services. Staff wages and benefits are an allowable use of USDA funds, or CARES Act funds if they are needed to respond, prepare, or prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Grantees who temporarily do not have kitchen staff to prepare food can consider other options to provide nutritional support to families. Head Start programs can take advantage of [USDA programs and flexibilities](#) and develop or strengthen partnerships with local food banks or nonprofits. They can also provide food boxes either through delivery or pick-up.

Regardless of how a program decides to address this issue, please note that child nutrition is a foundational element of Head Start and Early Head Start service delivery ([45 CFR §1302.44](#)). Programs are required to provide nutrition support to families and to identify each child's nutritional health needs ([45 CFR §§1302.46](#) and [1302.42\(b\)\(4\)](#)).

In the event that a grantee does not have kitchen staff due to safety concerns, staff should be made aware that the CDC reports the risk of getting COVID-19 from eating or handling food and food packages to be very low. For more information regarding kitchen safety, please see the CDC's [Food and COVID-19](#) webpage.

4) Q: Can children enrolled in the home-based option receive meal service through CACFP?

A: If a child is normally enrolled in the home-based program option, CACFP does not cover food costs other than for the meals and snacks served during group socializations. However, programs can use COVID-19 or operational funds to provide meals to home-based learners, both for group socializations and other nutrition services.

5) Q: If we have used up our CARES Act funding, can we use our main grant to provide food boxes for the meals and snacks not reimbursed by USDA?

A: Yes. OHS funds may be used to cover the cost of food for the enrolled child when allowable costs are not covered by the USDA ([45 CFR §1302.44\(b\)](#)).

Remember, while all OHS funds require adequate documentation of why the expense is necessary and reasonable, CARES Act funds require a direct connection to preventing, preparing for, and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

6) Q: Can we give families grocery gift cards to purchase meals with Head Start and Early Head Start funds?

A: In general, services are for the enrolled child. However, we are operating in unprecedented times. Hunger among other household members may interfere with the ability of the family to support and participate in the delivery of remote services to the enrolled child. If that is the case, then Head Start and CARES Act funds can be used to provide food to the household so that learning can effectively occur in the home. This is allowable in rare cases where community food resources are exhausted or cannot be accessed by the family of an enrolled child, due to home quarantine for example.

The expense of grocery store gift cards would need to be both reasonable and necessary, with adequate documentation that explains why.

7) Q: CACFP only allows meals for the Head Start child. How do we provide a meal for the Head Start child and not the other children in the family?

A: A program's initial response to food insecurity and hunger for enrolled families is to connect the family with community resources such as food pantries. Even if an enrolled child's food needs are being met, hunger on the part of other household members can interfere with the ability of the family to support and participate in the delivery of remote services to the enrolled child. In those rare cases where community food resources are exhausted or cannot be accessed by the family of an enrolled child, due to quarantine in the home, for example, Head Start and CARES Act funds can be used to provide food to the household so that learning can effectively occur in the home.

8) Q: How do we document attendance for non-congregate meals?

A: Documenting attendance for non-congregate meals can include daily rosters, sign-in sheets, or, with state agency approval, other methods that result in accurate recording of daily attendance. Programs should check with their local CACFP agency contact regarding required documentation.

9) Q: Are meals that incorporate component flexibilities reimbursable under CACFP?

A: Yes, meals are reimbursable under CACFP if the program's state agency approves the meal pattern/component flexibility.

10) Q: Can someone address accommodations of students with food allergies within these programs?

A: When planning a non-congregate meal service, state agencies and program operators should consider how individuals who require meal modifications will be identified and served. Students with documented special dietary needs and food allergies must continue to be accommodated during COVID-19. Programs should make every effort to provide appropriate meal substitutions for these students. Program staff should have open conversations with families about how meal accommodations are typically made at home and consider if similar accommodations are feasible in the program.

11) Q: Is there flexibility for reimbursement when a meal is not picked up by or delivered to an enrolled child?

A: No. Meals must be picked up or properly delivered to be claimed for reimbursement.

12) Q: Can CACFP sites that remain open implement the non-congregate and meal time nationwide waivers?

A: The nationwide waivers to allow meal service time flexibilities and non-congregate feeding in the Child Nutrition Programs during the coronavirus pandemic do not require that a CACFP site be closed. Under these waivers, day care homes and centers that are still open can provide meal service on site to participants in attendance. They can also arrange meal service pick-ups or delivery for participants temporarily not in attendance. If the CACFP operator determines there is a need and it is logistically feasible to implement these options, it can do so for all or some of its participants.

13) Q: If a parent wants to pick up part of the meal, can we still count it for reimbursement? For example, they want the main meal but not the milk.

A: Programs should gently remind parents the importance of each component and how items like milk contain many key nutrients that support a child's growth and development. Parents must pick up a complete meal (including milk) in order for it to be claimed for reimbursement.

14) Q: If a child does not have the state-mandated flu shot, can we still claim grab-and-go meals through CACFP?

A: Programs should check with their local CACFP agency contact.

15) Q: Head Start programs that are continuing to operate CACFP using the non-congregate nationwide waiver want to send home infant formula for the week. Is this allowed?

A: Yes. Please see [Providing Multiple Meals at a Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

16) Q: May a center- or home-based early childhood program claim reimbursement for CACFP meals that children take home to consume on weekend days when they are not in care?

A: Under certain circumstances, yes. Please see [Q&As Relating to the Nationwide Waiver to Allow Summer Food Service Program \(SFSP\) and Seamless Summer Option \(SSO\) Operations Through School Year 2020-2021](#), question 11.

17) Q: What is the maximum number of program meals and snacks that can be claimed for federal reimbursement each day?

A: Please see [Child Nutrition Program Nationwide Waivers: Q&As](#), question 8.

18) Q: If a center- or home-based early childhood program continues to provide CACFP meals and snacks during the COVID-19 pandemic, can the facility also be approved to operate as an SFSP site?

A: Yes, under certain circumstances. Please see [Child Nutrition Program Meal Service During Novel Coronavirus Outbreaks: Q&As](#), question 2.

19) Q: Does the child need to be present for home meal delivery?

A: No. Please see [COVID-19 Congregate Meal Waivers & Q&As on Summer Meal Delivery Using Existing Authority](#), question 7.

20) Q: Are signatures required?

A: No. As long as the CACFP operator has obtained the household's written consent to deliver meals and has verified the current address, the child or adult participant does not need to be present at the time of delivery. If the meals are shelf stable, no one need be present as long as the address has been verified. Please consider state and local food safety requirements and best practices.

It is critical that agencies protect the confidentiality of participants and their households throughout this process. When using Head Start program dollars for meal support not reimbursable by USDA, grantees need to follow their policies and procedures for tracking and documenting the use of those funds.

21) Q: How can we address children going to a center but not wanting to eat or drink for the whole day?

A: Teachers and caregivers should be aware of changes in behavior, such as irregular eating and sleep patterns, and how they may be a result of stress or anxiety in children due to the pandemic. [Helping Children Cope](#) from the CDC provides a good resource for identifying behavioral changes in children.

22) Q: Is it safe for children to have vitamin supplements?

A: Parents are encouraged to check with their child's primary care physician regarding the use of [vitamin supplements](#). We know that healthy eating behaviors lead to higher consumption of foods containing nutrients that protect us from illness, including those caused by bacterial and viral infections. Families should focus on providing children a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and nuts, dairy foods, and lean protein sources. Children should have limited intake of red and processed meat, refined carbohydrates, and sugar.

23) Q: All food items we provide are shelf stable. Are we allowed to give families two weeks of food at a time?

A: State agencies will approve a plan that includes pick-up of meals for multiple days, up to one week at a time. Programs should check with their state and local CACFP agencies for more information.

24) Q: Are we supposed to sanitize food packages (e.g., case of canned fruit)?

A: Currently, there is no evidence that food is associated with spreading the virus that causes COVID-19. Programs should regularly clean kitchen counters and use a disinfectant product from the Environmental Protection Agency's [List N: Disinfectants for COVID-19](#), following the manufacturer's directions. Before preparing food on the kitchen counter, rinse disinfected surface with water. If program staff wish, they may wipe down product packaging and allow it to air dry as an extra precaution. Do not use disinfecting products on food or food packaging as it may stay on the surface or get inside products and be consumed. After shopping, handling food packages, or before preparing or eating food, it is important to always wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Please refer to the CDC's [Food and COVID-19](#) webpage for additional food safety information.

25) Q: How can we avoid losing reimbursement because families signed up for meal pick-up and never arrived? Sometimes, 50% of families that order meals do not pick up the food.

A: Programs should set up regular lines of communication with families around meal pick-up. This can be a simple text message reminder that families opt-in for when registering for meal pick-ups. Families are under a lot of stress right now and reminders and regular communication may help. Head Start staff can reach out to those families not picking up food to ask how the program can support them. It may be something as simple as not having appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), like a mask, or fear of getting COVID-19 in public that prevents them from picking up food.

26) Q: Do you have any guidance or reference for bottles and other home items being brought into the center?

A: For infant bottles, programs and families should continue to practice safe handling and feeding of breastmilk and formula. Before preparing a bottle, program staff should wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Parents and guardians should supply enough clean and sterilized bottles to be used throughout the day. The bottles must be sanitary, properly prepared, and stored when not in use. For more information, refer to Caring for Our Children (CFOC) standards [4.3.1.3: Preparing, Feeding, and Storing Human Milk](#) and [4.3.1.5: Preparing, Feeding, and Storing Infant Formula](#).

Programs should encourage families to wash their child's water bottle daily. Similar to serving meals and snacks, program staff should be responsible for refilling water bottles.

If other items, including food, are being brought in from home, refer to the [webinar resource list](#) for more information on safety and handling.

27) Q: What is the recommendation regarding use of non-disposable utensils during mealtime?

A: Programs using non-disposable utensils during meals and snack time should continue [safe food practices](#). Clean utensils and cookware with hot soapy water, rinse, and sanitize.

28) Q: What is the recommendation for serving water during family style meals?

A: During the COVID-19 pandemic response, programs should plan for staff to offer and serve water individually to children rather than using a self-service option, such as a water tank or pitcher.

29) Q: How can we help identify families struggling with food insecurity?

A: According to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), a screening assessment tool as simple as a survey can accurately help to identify families struggling with food insecurity. The survey can include two or three yes/no questions or statements, such as:

1. "In the past one to two months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more."
2. "In the past one to two months, the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more."
3. "In the past one to two months, we've had to lower the quality of food because money was tight."

These types of questions are typically asked at enrollment. Programs may want to check in with families to determine if they need additional nutritional support due to the pandemic.

30) Q: Where can we find MyPlate and is it available at no cost to Head Start programs?

A: [MyPlate](#) is a free service from the USDA to help make every bite count. It offers many [tools](#) and [print materials](#) for programs to support the healthy nutrition of children and families.

31) Q: How can we safely set up and seat children for mealtime in Head Start centers while socially distancing? Should staff no longer eat alongside children in class?

A: Programs must ensure all mealtime surfaces and areas are clean and have been disinfected. Staff, not children, should handle table and place settings and the distribution of meals and beverages. Keep food covered whenever possible to avoid contamination. Ensure meals are provided by staff wearing face masks. Paper goods and disposable plastic utensils can be used during this time for quick clean up and to reduce potential exposure. Maintain distances of 6 feet between tables and between children. Stagger seating so children are not directly in front of and facing each other. When children must share a table, using name cards may help to ensure adequate spacing. Once seated, staff can remind children to "catch their coughs and sneezes in their elbows".

32) Q: Is 3 feet considered physical distancing? For some reason, I am seeing this at our local public middle and elementary schools.

A: OHS and the National Center on Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety recommend continuing to follow the 6-foot distancing guidance set by the CDC.

33) Q: Are there changes to diapering and feeding procedures for Early Head Start babies?

A: Programs should continue proper diaper changing procedures and appropriate hand-washing. Refer to CFOC Standard [3.2.1.4: Diaper Changing Procedure](#). The CDC provides more information on breastfeeding and bottle feeding during the pandemic here: <https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/breastfeeding-special-circumstances/maternal-or-infant-illnesses/covid-19-and-breastfeeding.html>