

The Child Care and Adult Food Program (CACFP):

Strategies for Change

Child care programs can support the health, wellness, and development of young children when they participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). This important federal program improves the nutrition and health of children, supports family budgets, and strengthens the quality and financial stability of child care programs. This resource shares information about CACFP, using story maps to assess program participation, common barriers to participation, and strategies for states and CCR&Rs to expand CACFP.

WHAT IS CACFP?

In 1968, Congress expanded its federal nutrition programs to provide daily nutritious meals and snacks to children in child care programs through the establishment of CACFP. This program is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through grants to states, which then provide [reimbursements](#) to eligible sponsors for each qualifying meal they serve. Eligible sponsors include child care centers, family child care programs, Head Start programs, afterschool programs, and homeless shelters. Participating programs can provide meals to children up to age 12 and must meet federal nutrition standards and meal patterns set by USDA to be reimbursed. Centers and family child care programs may be approved to claim up to two reimbursable meals and one snack, or two snacks and one meal, to each eligible child per day.



CACFP REIMBURSEMENT RATES

CACFP reimbursement rates are adjusted at the federal level annually. Reimbursements vary based on the type of meal served, program setting, and income levels of participants—center-based programs are reimbursed at free, reduced-price, or paid rates for eligible meals and snacks served to enrolled children, while family child care programs are reimbursed using a [two-tiered system](#). Tier 1 rates provide higher levels of reimbursement to family child care programs who are in low-income areas. Tier 2 rates provide lower levels of reimbursements to family child care programs that do not meet the location or provider income criteria for Tier 1 rates.

CCR&RS ARE KEY CACFP PARTNERS

Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&Rs) agencies are equipped to help child care providers participate in CACFP. CCR&Rs provide technical assistance to help with paperwork and enroll programs in CACFP, and in some cases, act at the sponsoring agency to help administer the program. CCR&Rs also help make connections between providers and nutrition coaches, who share strategies with providers to promote healthy food financing initiatives. Some examples of where CCR&Rs support CACFP include:

- [Child Care Aware® of North Dakota](#) helps providers identify local food sponsors and raise awareness of the program's benefits among non-participating providers.
- [The Family Conservancy](#), a CCR&R serving Kansas and Missouri, serves as the sponsoring agency for CACFP in seven counties. They provide nutrition and meal planning information to providers and make connections with a nutrition specialist, who provides on-site training and support throughout the year.
- CCR&Rs that are co-located within a larger nonprofit organization that provides additional wrap-around services for families, like [Child Care Aware® of New Hampshire](#), can also match eligible families with other benefits, like SNAP and WIC.



CHILD CARE PARTICIPATION IN CACFP

Data from USDA shows that prior to March 2020, total participation in CACFP grew from 2.7 million children to 4.7 million children from 2000-2019. This growth over two decades was mostly concentrated around center-based programs. Conversely, the number of children participating in CACFP who were enrolled in a family child care program dropped in that same time span from 1 million to nearly 700,000 children. The decline coincides with a drop in the supply of family child care programs. The pandemic caused participation to plummet among both center-based and family child care programs. Center-based program participation has continued to recover, though it was still below pre-pandemic numbers in 2021. Participation for family child care declined even further in 2021 compared to the prior year. In fact, more than 46% of family child care providers participating in CACFP have been lost since 1996.

BARRIERS TO CACFP PARTICIPATION

CACFP is often underutilized in states, with common challenges including low awareness, inadequate reimbursement rates, and burdensome reporting and administrative requirements. Across program settings, providers share that the application process to enroll is difficult to navigate, meal pattern requirements are hard to comply with, and enrollment and reporting paperwork is burdensome.

Inadequate reimbursements are another reason why programs do not participate in CACFP, especially for family child care, who are reimbursed at two different rates depending on their household income or the income of the families served. As a result, family child care providers who are eligible for the lower reimbursement rate are often hesitant to participate. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several waivers were provided to offer more flexibility

for programs and providers, including allowing child care programs and family child care programs to automatically receive the highest CACFP reimbursement rate regardless of their location.

An additional strain for programs is CACFP currently only reimburses two meals and a snack (or two snacks and a meal), meaning participating programs must pay for any additional non-reimbursable meals and snacks out of their own pockets. Many children are in care for a full day and often longer, especially if their parents work nontraditional hours, and additional meals or snacks are necessary to keep children fed.

MAPPING CACFP PARTICIPATION

Since 2019, Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA) and Nemours Children’s Health have partnered to create geographic information system (GIS) technology [story maps to visualize CACFP participation](#) and highlight communities that could be considered for CACFP expansion. A story map combines both maps and text to help users interpret what they see. These maps layer information about child care provider location, participation in CACFP, food access and family poverty. You can [explore the CACFP story maps](#) created to assess CACFP participation in different states since the project began in 2019.

Each story map includes state-specific “Strategies for Change” that could have the greatest potential to expand participation and bolster CACFP. While these tactics vary state to state, they have typically focused around using the story maps to boost awareness of CACFP, strengthen systems of support for providers and sponsors, and shift state and federal policies and funding streams to fortify the program overall.

You can find the collective CACFP “Strategies for Change” since 2019 on the final page of this resource.

Boost CACFP Awareness



Share the map

Share this map widely and with ECE stakeholders in your state to bring awareness of CACFP!



Understand barriers

Hold community listening sessions, conduct provider surveys or reach out directly to non-participating providers to learn about barriers to participation.



Build partnerships

Partner with CACFP sponsor organizations, CCR&Rs, the state CACFP office and other groups that work directly with providers to get the word out about CACFP.



Create resources

Work with partners to develop a user-friendly factsheet about CACFP, addressing common questions and translated into all languages spoken in the community.



Target outreach to FCC

Target outreach to providers in high-need areas and to family child care (FCC) providers through [staffed FCC networks](#).



Engage ambassadors

Recruit child care program ambassadors who already participate to help spread the word about CACFP in their networks or communities. Compensate them with stipends, kitchen supplies, or access to free or discounted trainings.

Strengthen Systems of Support



Develop support systems

Develop a system of support for child care providers that will include resources, best practices and details on how to fill out relevant paperwork and establish a mentorship program for interested programs to match with participating providers.



Recruit sponsors

Recruit and fund new CACFP sponsor organizations, particularly in high-need areas.



Enhance data systems

Maintain and fund regular, [interoperable](#) data sharing and analysis between child care and CACFP data holders and curators



Invest in coaching

Fund TA and nutrition coaching through CACFP sponsors, CCR&Rs, or other community partners.

Shift State & Federal Policies



Increase state funds

Increase CACFP reimbursement rates with supplemental state funding.



Champion progress

Share support for [federal proposals](#) that expand CACFP and [leverage federal relief](#) dollars to support the quality improvement of child nutrition.



Elevate Farm-to-ECE

Educate policymakers about [Farm-to-ECE](#) and highlight why additional state funding is needed to support this program.



Reduce burdens

Streamline requirements, reduce duplicative paperwork and support technology systems to improve program access for programs, sponsors, and families.



Align standards and procedures

Consider how to review and align standards and monitoring procedures across licensing, child nutrition programs, and other programs to reduce the administrative burden of compliance for providers.



Improve reimbursements

Increase rates, address payment delays and support timely reimbursements, reimburse additional meals, and allow all FCC to qualify for the highest rate.