



Summary of the Evaluation of the USDA Summer EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) Demonstrations: Lessons Learned From More Than a Decade of Research

Introduction

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 (P.L. 117-328) amended the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act by authorizing Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) as a permanent Federal food assistance entitlement program beginning in summer 2024.¹ Summer EBT provides benefits on EBT cards so that families can purchase food for their children during the summer months when school is not in session. Summer EBT has been tested through evaluations of demonstration projects since 2011. With pending implementation of this new program, this is an appropriate time to reflect on what USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) research has learned through more than a decade of study.

Overview of the Demonstration Projects

The 2010 Agriculture Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-80) provided grant funding to States and Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) to test innovative strategies to end childhood hunger and food insecurity in the summer months. The Summer EBT demonstrations, which began in 2011, were intended to supplement and bolster FNS nutrition assistance during the summer months. Prior research has found that childhood and household food insecurity rises when schools are out of session and school meals are unavailable.² While USDA summer meal programs, including the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Seamless Summer Option of the National School Lunch Program (SSO), help narrow this gap, in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 only about 3.5 million children participated in the summer meal programs on an average summer day compared to about 30 million in the National School Lunch Program during the school year. Summer meal program participation is limited by a variety of structural and logistical factors, including that children are not required to attend summer programming in the same way that they're required to attend school and free transportation is generally not provided. In addition, sites don't always offer a meal service that is accessible to families. For example, children may be unable to access summer meals if their community doesn't have sites, there are limited transportation options, sites don't operate the entire summer, or daily meal service times are not practical for families.³

Over the course of the demonstrations, 10 States and 3 ITOs received grants to operate Summer EBT for at least 1 year (see Appendix A for a table of grantees by year). Appropriated funds for the demonstrations grew significantly each year, allowing grantees to expand the reach of the demonstration from around 12,500 children in 2011 to 279,000 children in 2018. Due to operational challenges arising from the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and the availability of State-administered Pandemic EBT,⁴ no States implemented their projects after 2020. Three ITOs, however, continued to administer their projects through 2023.

¹ 42 USC § 1762

² Huang J, Barnidge E, Kim Y. Children Receiving Free or Reduced-Price School Lunch Have Higher Food Insecurity Rates in Summer. *J Nutr.* 2015 Sep;145(9):2161-8. doi: 10.3945/jn.115.214486. Epub 2015 Jul 22. PMID: 26203095.

³ Vericker, T., Rothstein, M., Zimmerman, T., Gabay, M., et al. (2021). *USDA Summer Meals Study*. Prepared by Westat, Contract No. AG-3198-K-16-0033. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Grant Lovellette.

⁴ Pandemic EBT was part of the U.S. Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in 2020, eligible school children received temporary emergency nutrition benefits loaded on EBT cards that could be used to purchase SNAP-eligible foods from SNAP-authorized retailers.

Two distinct Summer EBT models were piloted. Under both models, households with children from prekindergarten to 12th grade who were enrolled at National School Lunch Program (NSLP)-participating schools who had been certified for free or reduced-price meals in the previous school year received benefits on an EBT card and used the card to redeem their benefits at an authorized retailer. One set of States implemented the demonstrations through their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) EBT systems. Under this SNAP model, participants could redeem benefits for any SNAP-eligible foods at any SNAP-authorized retailer in the country. The other group of States and ITOs implemented Summer EBT through their Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) systems. Under the WIC model, participants could redeem benefits for a predetermined package of foods at WIC-authorized retailers. Seven grantees used a SNAP model and six, including three ITOs, used a WIC model.

In 2011 to 2014, participants were randomly assigned to receive a \$30 or \$60 per child per month benefit, depending on the year—or a food package equivalent to those amounts for WIC model grantees. In 2015 and 2016, FNS allowed continuing grantees to provide \$60 benefits to returning households that had received that amount in previous years, but any new participants received \$30 in benefits. Beginning in 2017, FNS required a \$30 benefit amount for all participants. ITOs operating after 2020 were permitted to test expanded food packages, some of which were valued as high as \$61 per child per month.

Grantees were required to obtain consent from households to participate in Summer EBT and chose to implement either active or passive consent processes. The active consent process required households to opt-in by enrolling in the project. Conversely, in the passive consent process, eligible households were automatically enrolled in the project and issued benefits unless they indicated they did not wish to be included.

Overview of the Evaluations

The 2010 Agricultural Appropriations Act also provided funding for a rigorous evaluation of the newly authorized demonstration projects. The first evaluation studied how the demonstrations unfolded over the period 2011 to 2014 as well as impacts on outcomes such as food security and children’s nutrition. Subsequent evaluations were conducted as the demonstrations expanded and examined demonstrations operating from 2015 to 2018 and those operating from 2019 to 2023. These evaluations focused on objectives related to program implementation and administration.

2011 to 2014

To evaluate the impact of Summer EBT, households were randomly assigned to one of three groups depending on the year. The two treatment groups received either a \$30 or \$60 per child per month benefit amount (or, in WIC model grantees, a food package valued at approximately \$30 or \$60). The third group (the control group) did not receive a monthly benefit. Using this model, the evaluation was able to estimate the causal impact of different levels of Summer EBT receipt on food insecurity and nutritional outcomes.

While a randomized controlled trial is considered a gold standard for testing causal impacts, in many cases when studying social programs an experimental design is not practicable because withholding benefits from eligible individuals to create a control group may not be allowable or ethical.⁵ The initial implementation of the Summer EBT demonstrations, however, provided a rare opportunity to implement such a study design because, in the early years, the demonstrations were smaller in scale and allowed for assignment of a control group.

2015 to 2018

The 2015 to 2018 evaluations did not include an experimental design to examine impact of the benefit on children’s nutritional status because the efficacy of the EBT model was already demonstrated in the prior year’s evaluations.

Children who would have received free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Act if their schools were not closed or operating with reduced hours or attendance for at least 5 consecutive days were eligible to receive benefits. The program also provided benefits to younger children in households who participated in SNAP whose covered childcare facility was closed or operating with reduced hours or attendance, or who lived in the area of schools that were closed or operating with reduced hours or attendance. The program ended following the expiration of the COVID-19 public health emergency in May 2023.

⁵ Torgerson, C.J., Torgerson, D.J. and Taylor, C.A. (2015). Randomized Controlled Trials. In *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (eds K.E. Newcomer, H.P. Hatry and J.S. Wholey). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch7>

Instead, the goal of this set of evaluations was to examine implementation and administration of the grants and continue gathering information on patterns in household benefit use among Summer EBT participants. To accomplish these evaluation objectives, the evaluation team conducted surveys and interviews with grantees and collected detailed household-level administrative data and EBT transaction data.

2019 to 2023

As noted above, due to the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, only three ITOs operated the program in this period, and all used a WIC model. One State that was already implementing its project at the onset of the pandemic also operated using the WIC model in 2020, completing the final year of its grant. In addition to the methods employed to evaluate the 2015 to 2018 grantees, the evaluator conducted focus groups with participants and fielded mobile surveys of 2,000 households who requested EBT cards but did not redeem benefits in 2 participating ITOs.

How Permanent Summer EBT Differs From the Demonstration Projects

Many of the provisions of the permanent Summer EBT program authorized in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 and beginning in summer 2024 reflect promising practices gleaned over the course of the demonstrations. However, the permanent program differs from the demonstrations in some notable ways, chief among them:

Nationwide Implementation: Whereas the demonstrations only operated in a relatively small number of sites, often in areas of very high need in selected grantee States and ITOs, the permanent Summer EBT program is nationwide and not limited to specific areas. Under permanent Summer EBT, any household with a child who was eligible for free or reduced-price meals in the preceding school year or during the summer is eligible to receive the Summer EBT benefit after a State or ITO begins implementation.

Model and Benefit Value: Permanent Summer EBT retains the two benefit models in the demonstration project (either SNAP or WIC), but the model used depends on the type of administering agency. States (i.e., the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and territories) will use a SNAP model providing each eligible child \$40 per month and \$120 per summer in 2024, compared to \$60 or \$30 per month in the demonstrations. ITOs that administer WIC may also elect to operate Summer EBT as an independent administering agency that is equivalent to a State. When a State and ITO serve proximate areas, the ITO will receive priority consideration to serve children within their jurisdiction.

Automatic Enrollment: While the demonstrations allowed for grantees to require participants to opt-in, under the permanent program all eligible households will be automatically enrolled in the program when possible and must opt-out if they do not want to participate. For those who cannot be automatically enrolled, an application must be made available so households can establish if they qualify for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program. The most notable of this group are students in schools operating the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) who were not identified through direct certification but would be otherwise eligible for free or reduced-price school meals by application.

Administrative Costs: Under permanent Summer EBT, States and ITOs may draw Federal funds to cover up to 50 percent of their administrative costs as budgeted in an annual Plan for Operations and Management submitted to USDA. During the demonstrations, participating States and ITOs could use their grants to cover up to 100 percent of administrative costs.

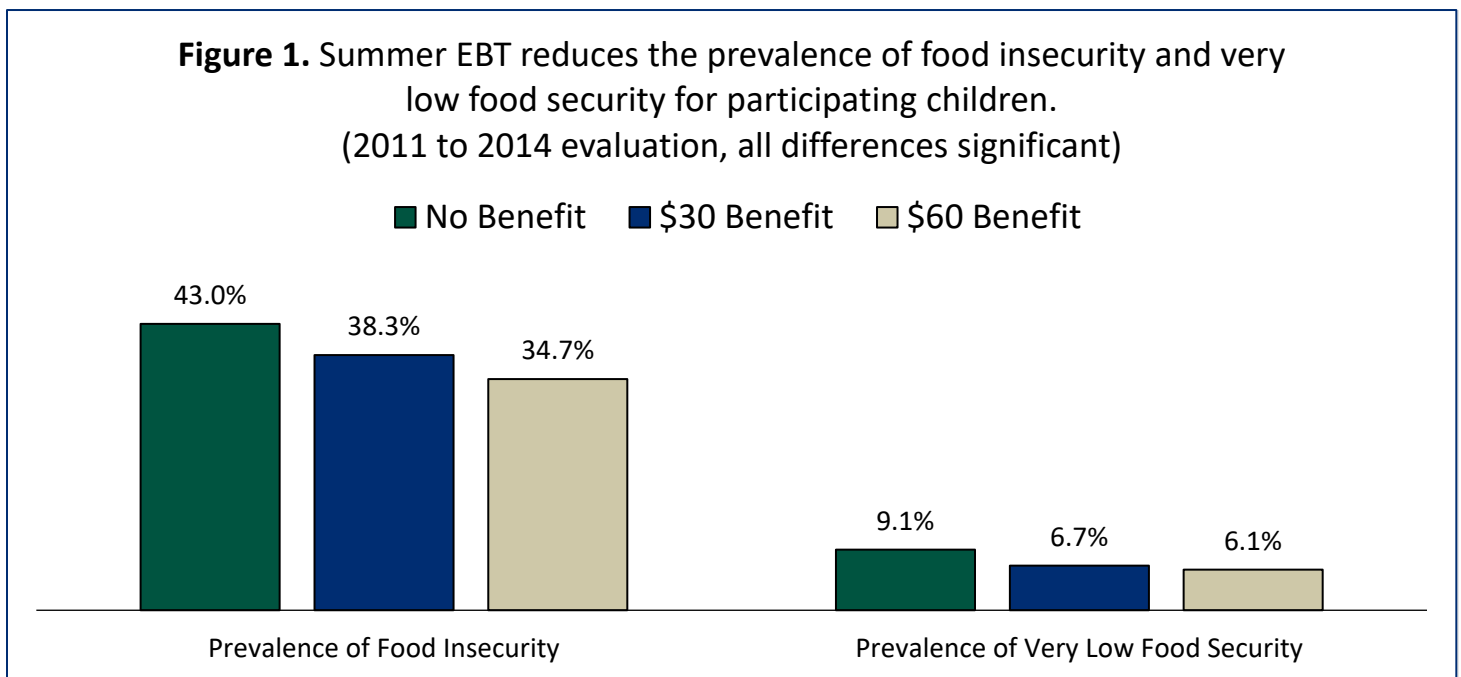
What We Know About Summer EBT

After three rigorous evaluation periods covering 13 years of demonstrations, USDA has a strong understanding of the role the Summer EBT model plays in closing the summer hunger gap for children, as well as the ways households use their benefits and the preferences and opinions of parents and caregivers about the program.

Summer EBT Fights Summer Childhood Food Insecurity

The evaluation conducted in 2013 found that Summer EBT reduced the prevalence of food insecurity among participating children by up to one-fifth—43.0 percent of households who did not receive Summer EBT reported having food insecure children compared to 38.3 percent of households who received a \$30 monthly benefit and 34.7 percent who received a \$60 monthly benefit.

In addition, children who received Summer EBT benefits were significantly less likely to experience the most severe form of food insecurity than comparable children who did not receive Summer EBT. Specifically, 6.1 percent of children who received the \$60 Summer EBT benefit and 6.7 percent of those who received the \$30 monthly benefit experienced very low food security, compared to 9.1 percent of children that did not receive any benefit. See Figure 1.



Summer EBT Promotes a Healthy Diet

The study design also allowed evaluators to test the effects of receiving Summer EBT on a child's consumption of various foods. Compared to children who received no benefit, children in households receiving a \$60 Summer EBT benefit on average (all differences listed below are significant):

- Consumed 0.4 more cups of fruits and vegetables (with or without fried potatoes included) per day.
- Consumed 1.7 more ounces of whole grains per day.
- Consumed 0.2 more cups of dairy per day.
- Had no difference in the total amount of added sugars consumed, and consumed about half a teaspoon less in added sugars when cereals are excluded.
- Consumed 0.6 teaspoons less of sugar-sweetened beverages per day.
- Had no difference in their likelihood to drink nonfat or low-fat milk.

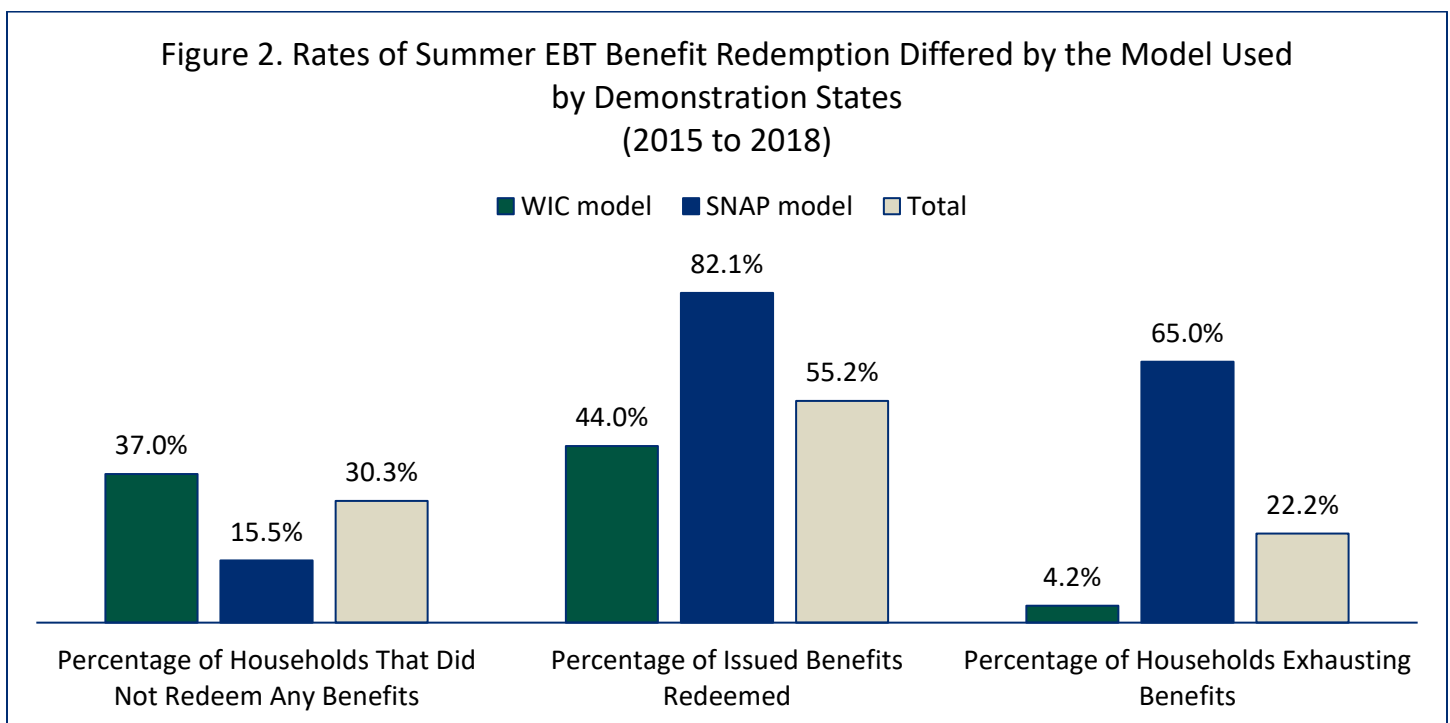
These impacts were consistent across SNAP and WIC models, though WIC models demonstrated more favorable nutrition impacts. Those children whose households received a \$30 benefit also saw favorable nutritional impacts, though the impact on consumption of fruits and vegetables and whole grains was slightly smaller.

Some Eligible Households Do Not Redeem Some or Any of Their Benefits

From 2015 to 2018, nearly one-third (30.3 percent) of households that were issued Summer EBT benefits in a given summer never actually redeemed any of those benefits. This was generally much lower in grantees that used a SNAP model—only about 15.5 percent of households receiving benefits in SNAP model demonstrations failed to redeem any benefits, compared to 37 percent of households using the WIC model.

Among households that *did* redeem at least some benefits, the average household redeemed 79.6 percent of the benefits they received. There was a noticeable difference between households receiving benefits through the WIC model and those using the SNAP model. Households receiving benefits through the SNAP model redeemed 97.1 percent of benefits on average, compared to 69.9 percent among households using the WIC model.

When households that did not redeem *any* benefits are factored in, 55.2 percent of all benefits issued were redeemed across all demonstrations. However, there were notable differences based on the benefit delivery model, with households redeeming 82.1 percent of all benefits in SNAP model States compared to 44.0 percent of all benefits in WIC model grantees. Nearly two-thirds of households in States using the SNAP model redeemed *all* of their benefits, compared to fewer than 5 percent of households in States and ITOs using the WIC model. See Figure 2.



In summary, eligible households in WIC model States were less likely to redeem any benefits and, when they did, redeemed significantly fewer benefits than households in demonstration States using the SNAP model. This finding could be driven by such factors as households with schoolage children being more likely to have familiarity with SNAP and less familiarity with WIC. Relatedly, SNAP model benefits may have been easier to redeem when co-loaded with SNAP benefits on the same account.

Other factors that affected redemption rates were household size and previous Summer EBT participation. As the number of children in a household increased—and benefit amounts correspondingly increased—households were more likely to redeem and exhaust their benefits. Households new to Summer EBT generally redeemed less of their benefits compared to households that had received benefits in previous summers and therefore had experience with the program.

Parents and Caregivers Appreciate Summer EBT

Summer EBT was perceived by participating parents as a critical source of nutrition assistance, filling in gaps in nutritional needs. Parents and caregivers reported that the Summer EBT benefits increased the total amount of food that their households could afford to purchase and shifted the mix of purchased foods toward healthier options. Parents in focus groups noted with appreciation that the program allowed them to shop where they wanted, could be rolled

over through the summer months, and provided a degree of flexibility in choices by allowing them to choose food to purchase.

Challenges and Opportunities for Summer EBT

Over the course of the demonstration projects, evaluations revealed some consistent challenges faced by administering States and ITOs. The authorization of a permanent Summer EBT program to begin in summer 2024 gives USDA and administering States and ITOs the opportunity to calibrate the program to account for these challenges and ensure that the benefits of the new program can reach everyone who qualifies.

Challenge: Confusion and Lack of Information About the Program

Consistently throughout the demonstrations, participants—including those who reported never receiving or redeeming benefits—reported challenges with awareness of the program. Some indicated that redeeming their benefits was challenging because they did not understand how to use their benefit cards or they did not know which foods were eligible under the WIC model.

Likewise, the results from the survey of nonparticipants revealed that the top reasons for not using the benefits card were an overall lack of knowledge and awareness about how Summer EBT works, not being sure of what foods are eligible for purchase, not knowing which stores accepted the Summer EBT card, and card-related issues such as not being sure how to use the card or the card arriving late or not at all.

These challenges may have been a factor that influenced whether households used their EBT cards and the amount of issued benefits that went unredeemed in the demonstrations.

Opportunity: Diverse Outreach Techniques

To address issues that led to enrollees not using their benefits, grantees employed a variety of outreach techniques and technical assistance to raise awareness of the projects and boost redemption rates. Specific techniques that grantees used included promotion of Summer EBT through a local newspaper, websites, press releases, and public service announcements on the radio; mailing printed informational materials such as postcards, handouts, and short letters; and use of robocalls and text messages to remind households to redeem their Summer EBT benefits. Some ITOs found that hand-delivering Summer EBT cards during the pandemic expanded participation.

Parents and caregivers confirmed the need to communicate through diverse means. Parents identified schools as particularly crucial sources of information and outreach efforts. In addition, nonparticipants reported that the best methods to reach them would be via backpack mail, being contacted by the schools, and being contacted by a Tribal Leader or the Summer EBT office.

To support administering agencies in their efforts to get the word out about the new program, FNS will provide outreach and communications support and work with Federal partners and other stakeholders such as advocacy groups, local and State government officials, nutrition professionals, charitable organizations and foundations through initial implementation in summer 2024 and beyond. FNS is also requiring States and ITOs to offer a single point of service for families seeking help or information about Summer EBT.

Opportunity: Customer Support for ITOs Operating WIC Food Package Models

Two ITOs contracted with a service provider to expand access to a mobile WICShopper app for Summer EBT participants to help households identify items eligible for purchase through the WIC model. The app allowed households to scan barcodes to determine whether items were eligible, track their available Summer EBT benefits, and provided basic nutrition education. Households could also locate participating grocery stores by ZIP code using the app. Parents and caregivers in the two ITOs who were familiar with the app said they relied heavily on it.

In addition, ITOs reported a need to work closely with retailers to educate them about the program and encourage them to sufficiently stock Summer EBT foods. Participants appreciated stores where staff were well-trained in Summer EBT and could provide in-store support, including labeling for Summer EBT-approved items, to lower the chance of being turned away at the cash register.

Challenge: Timing of Grants and Staffing

Due to the annual grant cycle, particularly during the 2015 to 2018 period, administering agencies reported ongoing challenges with the yearly hiring and retraining of staff. Grantees were hindered in their ability to hire full-time staff to work on Summer EBT throughout the year. Instead, many grantees relied on temporary staff, contracted staff, or agency employees with time available to operate their demonstrations around their usual responsibilities.

Opportunity: Year-Round Approach

Grantees reported that having full-time, year-round staff devoted to the Summer EBT project would reduce the burden on temporary staff, help to retain institutional knowledge, allow for streamlining the benefit issuance process, and allow for outreach efforts to occur throughout the year.

For permanent Summer EBT, hiring full-time staff dedicated to the program will allow program activities like outreach, training, technical assistance, and eligibility determination to occur throughout the year.

A year-round approach with dedicated staffing will help mitigate potential issues with delivering EBT cards and outreach materials by allowing administering agencies to invest in training, building infrastructure, community engagement, and cultivating partnerships in the nonsummer months, which will lay the foundation for better program implementation.

Challenge: Quality and Availability of Data

To identify eligible children, grantees often had to compile eligibility information from multiple data sources. Though Summer EBT grantees had different benefit issuance processes, they faced similar ongoing challenges when identifying eligible students. Specifically, grantees had problems reconciling conflicting eligibility information from multiple data sources. Often reconciliation involved confirming information with school staff, which was time consuming and labor intensive. Grantees also had difficulty identifying eligible children who were enrolled in schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Grantees also reported difficulties involving benefits cards and outreach materials that were returned as undeliverable, largely because of the challenge of gathering accurate household addresses. All grantees reported that obtaining the correct addresses often involved checking alternate sources of information (e.g., Department of Motor Vehicles or SNAP records), contacting the schools, or contacting the households themselves if possible.

Opportunity: Centralized Statewide Data Systems

One grantee utilized a centralized data system that would annually compile all household information from multiple sources for households already eligible for free and reduced-price meals into one database, eliminating the need to exchange student lists. The State partnered with its Department of Education that housed student data files to create lists of eligible children. Previously, this State had to work with each School Food Authority (SFA) to generate lists of children. The database enabled the grantee to issue benefits efficiently on a larger scale as their project expanded. To ensure efficiency and integrity, Summer EBT agencies will be required, beginning in 2025, to establish and maintain a statewide or ITO-wide database of all children who are enrolled in NSLP- or School Breakfast Program (SBP)-participating schools within the State or ITO service area, for the purposes of enrolling eligible children for Summer EBT and detecting and preventing duplicate benefit issuance.

Opportunity: Centralized Application Process

Recent grantees collected applications via an online application. They reported that this application allowed for more efficient processing of applications, completion of project integrity checks, and acceptance of applications on a rolling basis. In addition, lessons learned from applications for school meals programs and Pandemic EBT suggests the creation of a user-friendly application that collects only necessary information to determine program eligibility. Summer EBT agencies will be required by 2025 to make an application available to children enrolled in NSLP- and/or SBP-participating schools who have not been certified through the streamlined certification process, which could allow them to collect standardized information in real time to more efficiently process data and enroll eligible children.

Challenge: Benefit Use and Delivery

Evaluations consistently found that a significant amount of issued benefits went unredeemed, and many States also experienced challenges with the way their benefits functioned for participants. For example, administering agencies may

have chosen to load Summer EBT benefits onto an existing EBT account for those households already receiving SNAP benefits. However, this may have led to a situation in which accounts that had both Summer EBT and SNAP benefits were defaulting to using SNAP benefits before Summer EBT benefits, sometimes causing Summer EBT benefits to “time out” before they could be used, as they must be used during the summer months. WIC model grantees also had issues with benefits timing out, as the food package did not originally carry over month to month.

Opportunity: Flexibility in Distributing Benefits

Two grantees co-loaded Summer EBT benefits on existing SNAP accounts and, in general, saw higher than average participation and redemption rates relative to other grantees. Of those, one grantee required Summer EBT benefits to be drawn down before SNAP benefits, which reduced the likelihood that families would run out of time to spend their benefits. Like the SNAP model, WIC model grantees also changed their processes to allow Summer EBT benefits to roll over to the following month within the summer months of project operation. This allowed participants more time to redeem their benefits. In the permanent Summer EBT Program, States and ITOs are permitted to co-load Summer EBT benefits on accounts with other benefit types. States and ITOs are also required to allow households a full 4 months after issuance to redeem their benefits. Summer EBT benefits that are co-loaded on accounts with other benefit types must be drawn down first, when applicable.

For More Information

Collins et al. (2015). *Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report 2011-2014*. Prepared by Abt Associates, Mathematica Policy Research, and Maximus. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Chanchalat Chanhatasilpa. Available online at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-electronic-benefit-transfer-children-sebtc-demonstration-summary-report>.

Nutter et al. (2024). *Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children Evaluation 2015-2018*. Prepared by Abt Associates. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Contract No. 12319818F0130. Project Officer: Chanchalat Chanhatasilpa.

Nutter et al. (2024). *Evaluation of the 2019-2022 Summer EBT Demonstration*. Prepared by Abt Associates. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Contract No. 12319819F0127. Project Officer: Chanchalat Chanhatasilpa.

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Appendix A: Summer EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) Demonstration Grantees by Year

| Grantee | Model | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---------------------------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Cherokee Nation (ITO) | WIC | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Chickasaw Nation (ITO) | WIC | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Connecticut | SNAP | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Delaware | SNAP | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona (ITO) | WIC | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Michigan | WIC | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Missouri | SNAP | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Nevada | WIC | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Oregon | SNAP | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tennessee | SNAP | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Texas | WIC | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Virginia | SNAP | | | | | | x | | | | | | | |
| Washington | SNAP | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

x – Virginia offered Summer EBT benefits in 2016 through the Demonstration Projects to End Childhood Hunger, which were authorized under the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010.

ITO – Indian Tribal Organization

WIC – Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program