ND agencies work together to provide food assistance to children who normally receive free and reduced-priced school lunches

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North Dakota's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and Department of Human Services have teamed up with support from the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services (USDA FNS) to provide food assistance during the pandemic emergency for children who participated in or qualified for the free and reduced-priced school lunch program prior to pandemic-related school closures.

USDA approved the state's plan on May 1 to operate the new Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer program (P-EBT), which was authorized by the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act. An estimated 39,670 North Dakota children ages 3-18 will benefit from the program.

"It is beyond difficult for a student to learn when he or she is hungry," said Kirsten Baesler, North Dakota's state school superintendent. "We are honored to partner with the Department of Human Services on this program, which is an important step toward preventing child hunger and helping our students to continue learning at home during a time when their schools are closed."

Families of children who participate in the child nutrition program at their school will receive a benefit amount on a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) EBT card, which is a specialized debit card. The benefit amount is intended to replace the value of the food in free and reduced-priced school meals.

“We are grateful to be able to work with DPI and to offer an easy way for parents to access funds and pay for needed groceries with a SNAP EBT card,” said Department of Human Services Executive Director Chris Jones.

The SNAP and child nutrition programs regularly collaborate to reduce childhood hunger by sharing information about their nutrition programs, Jones said.

Current SNAP households with children who participate in the free and reduced-priced school meal program will automatically receive the extra benefit on their EBT card. March school meal benefits will be available on their cards on May 9. April meal benefits will be available May 16, and May benefits on May 23. Notices will be mailed to inform each household that P-EBT benefits have been issued to their EBT card. If a household needs a replacement card, they must contact their local human service zone office (formerly county social service office).

DPI is working with schools to notify and to distribute a short application to about 7,400 additional qualifying families who do not currently participate in SNAP. Those parents and guardians will need to complete the application and return it to the North Dakota Department of Human Services, which will issue a SNAP EBT card with qualifying benefits.

SNAP benefits can only be used to purchase food items at SNAP-authorized retailers that typically include most grocery stores, participating farmers markets and other approved retailers.

Parents who have questions can contact the Department of Human Services’ Economic Assistance Division at SNAP-PEBT@nd.gov.

During the pandemic and the resulting temporary economic downturn, Human Services has taken other action to increase food assistance to prevent hunger. The agency issued extra SNAP benefits for March and April to qualifying SNAP households to ensure all SNAP households in the state received the maximum benefit amount for a household their size. This provided an extra $5.2 million in grocery buying power to about 16,000 SNAP households. May supplemental benefits will be available to qualifying SNAP households on May 19.

Most of North Dakota’s schools have been continuing to provide weekday breakfasts and lunches to their students, even though they are not required to do so when school is not in session. These meals, which are delivered or picked up at school, provide an important source of healthy, flavorful nutrition to North Dakota families.

North Dakotans who are having problems paying for food are encouraged to apply for SNAP online at www.nd.gov/dhs/info/pubs/application.html or by contacting their local human service zone office, formerly called county social service offices. Zone offices are temporarily restricting public access but are still providing services by phone, email and fax. Contact information is online at www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/countysocialserv/index.html.

In March 2020, the federally-funded program assisted about 23,000 low-income North Dakota households with their nutritional needs. On average, the monthly SNAP benefit per household is about $245 in North Dakota.

For more information about resources for individuals and families and the department's response to COVID-19, visit www.nd.gov/dhs/info/covid-19/index.html. For information about other resources supporting North Dakotans affected by the pandemic, visit ndresponse.gov/covid-19-resources.

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