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PRESS RELEASE

Massachusetts Receives Federal Approval for Thousands of Vulnerable Children to Receive Additional Food Benefits

2,600 additional children to directly qualify for free and reduced-price lunches and P-EBT benefits

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

2/04/2021

Executive Office of Health and Human Services

Department of Transitional Assistance

MEDIA CONTACT

Brooke Karanovich, Media Relations Manager

Online

Brooke.Karanovich2@state.ma.us (mailto:Brooke.Karanovich2@state.ma.us)

BOSTON — Massachusetts has received approval from the federal government to connect thousands of vulnerable children with disabilities with additional nutritional supports.

Beginning this month, certain children with disabilities who qualify for Medicaid because they receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) can be directly certified for free and reduced-price meals through the United States Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program (NSLP). This policy change will

connect approximately 2,600 children who are disabled and living with a relative caregiver to additional nutritional supports. These children will then also automatically meet one of the eligibility criteria to receive **Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)** (/info-details/pandemic-ebt-p-ebt). P-EBT provides additional emergency food benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic to cover the cost of missed school meals for more than 500,000 students in remote or hybrid learning environments and supports local grocery and corner stores and farmers.

“This benefit is important during a time of increased food insecurity for families in the state due to the economic impact of COVID-19,” said **Secretary of Health and Human Services Marylou Sudders**. “We will continue to maximize every opportunity to address nutritional needs of children and families, and use all federal food assistance programs and flexibilities during the public health emergency.”

Under standard rules, Medicaid programs are allowed to provide “Direct Certification” for children to qualify for free or reduced-price meals without the need for a household application based on their income-based Medicaid eligibility. However, due to different program rules, children who qualify for Medicaid because they receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and live with a relative caregiver, such as a grandparent, were not eligible to be directly certified for free or reduced-price meals. The Commonwealth has been pursuing federal approval to allow these thousands of vulnerable children to immediately be eligible for this important nutritional benefit for several years.

"These grandparents and all the kinship families are the true heroes here: raising their disabled grandkids, nieces and nephews at home, especially during the pandemic. Kinship families in Massachusetts and across the country need access to all available benefits to raise the next generation, including free school breakfast, lunch and Pandemic EBT benefits. No one in the Commonwealth should feel food insecure but unfortunately, we are dealing with record levels of hunger as the COVID-19 crisis continues on. We're glad we could assist the Baker Administration in advocating for this critical policy clarification under the National School Lunch Program and we are ready to assist in implementation,” said **Patricia Baker, Senior Policy Advocate, Mass Law Reform Institute**

Following the recent federal approval, the Commonwealth is immediately working to connect newly eligible children with these nutritional benefits, including P-EBT. Children made eligible for free or reduced-price school meals under this new approval who also qualify for P-EBT because they are either learning in a fully remote or hybrid model will receive their first round of P-EBT benefits on February 25.

MassHealth (/topics/masshealth)and the **Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)** (/orgs/department-of-elementary-and-secondary-education) are setting up system changes so that, when schools begin to operate school lunches again in the future, these children are directly certified through the eligibility systems.

During the federal public health emergency, all school aged children are able to receive free grab and go school meals through the summer meals program instead of NSLP. Families can find a school meal site near them at **https://meals4kids.org/** (https://meals4kids.org/).

Many households eligible for these supports may also be eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and are encouraged to **apply** (http://www.dtaconnect.com/).

This federal approval is one of several efforts Massachusetts has made to increase food security for children and families across the Commonwealth. Massachusetts’ COVID-19 Command Center’s Food Security Task

Force has worked to strengthen our local food system and maximize federal food assistance programs to ensure that food insecurity needs are addressed during the COVID-19 public health emergency and into the long-term.

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Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services

Executive Office of Health and Human Services
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The Executive Office of Health and Human Services is the largest secretariat in state government and is comprised of 12 agencies, in addition to 2 soldiers' homes and the MassHealth program. Our efforts are focused on the health, resilience, and independence of the one in four residents of the Commonwealth we serve. Our public health programs touch every community in the Commonwealth.

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Department of Transitional Assistance (/orgs/department-of-transitional-assistance)

The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) assists and empowers low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long term economic self-

sufficiency. DTA serves one in eight residents of the Commonwealth with direct economic assistance (cash benefits) and food assistance (SNAP benefits), as well as workforce training opportunities.

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