



Area Eligibility Policy and Procedures During COVID-19 Outbreak

Purpose

This policy provides guidance to National School Lunch Program (NSLP) School Food Authorities (SFAs) operating under the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors about expanding area eligibility during the coronavirus (COVID-19) meal distribution process.

Overview

Under [7 CFR 225](#), sponsors are required to conduct regularly scheduled food service for children from areas in which poor economic conditions exist. USDA issued [policy memo SP 08-2020, SFSP 04-2020](#) and related [Questions and Answers](#) on March 6, 2020 to provide guidance on operating child nutrition programs during the Novel Coronavirus outbreak.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service recognizes that during the current public health emergency, households in areas that do not meet the criteria of poor economic conditions may be facing financial hardship. On April 3, 2020, the USDA issued a waiver to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) related to the restrictions of site eligibility requirements. This waiver allows SFSP sponsors in good standing to operate open sites in areas approved by MDE. As directed by USDA in the waiver approval letter, “State agencies must have a plan for ensuring that new meal sites are targeting benefits to children in need, for example, children who may be newly eligible for benefits due to the economic impacts of COVID-19.”

Policy

SFAs who have school sites with 30 percent or more free or reduced-price eligible students will be prioritized to participate in SFSP as open sites. Once the prioritized sites have applied, MDE will open the process to other sites. Evidence of increased economic hardships for the families of children being served at the site must be provided to receive the waiver, unless the percentage of free or reduced-price eligible students is 45 percent or higher. Sites with 45 to 49.9 percent FRP eligible students will be approved for the waiver without additional evidence. Examples of evidence are included on the next page. As open sites, all meals served to children ages 18 and under may be claimed for reimbursement. Open sites offering home meal delivery must follow the requirements in the [USDA Meal Delivery using Existing Authority Guidance](#) from March 17, 2020.

Approval Process

Application

At this time, prioritized sites include those who are currently operating as a closed site with 30 to 49.9 percent FRP eligible students¹ and who can demonstrate evidence of economic hardship as a result of COVID-19. MDE notified sponsors of prioritized sites by email about the new area eligibility qualifications. To apply for the waiver, sponsors will submit an [SFSP Area Eligibility Waiver Request Form](#). MDE FNS staff will review each submission to determine eligibility and will request additional information from the sponsor, as needed.

Documentation of Evidence

Sites with 45 to 49.9 percent FRP eligible students will be approved for the waiver without additional evidence. This is based on the large increase in unemployment applications statewide.

Sites with 30 to 44.9 percent FRP eligible students will be approved with evidence of economic hardship in the community. The waiver request form requires the sponsor to upload documentation. Examples of evidence may include the following:

- Unemployment statistics showing a change from previous months (see [Local Area Unemployment Statistics²](#))
- News article citing business closures or shutdown of a major employer
- Letter from public official (e.g., mayor's office, county commissioner, economic development director, chamber of commerce, etc.) citing economic changes

Notification of Approval

If approved, waiver applicants will be notified by email with confirmation of the approval. Sites may not operate as an open site until the waiver is approved. Approval will be retroactive to the beginning of the month in which the approval occurred.

Duration

This waiver is in effective until June 30, 2020, the end of the school year, or until expiration of the federally declared public health emergency, whichever is the earliest. After this time, regular SFSP eligibility requirements will be in place.

¹ Percentage of free or reduced-price eligible students are based on the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) data for school years 2018-19 and 2019-20. If MARSS data is unavailable, the SFA may average the FRP percentage of claimed meals for the months of December, January, and February.

² The data release schedule is available on the [MN Department of Employment and Economic Development \(DEED\) website](#).