

Closing Gaps in Summer EBT

Practical Solutions to Reach All Children



Since Summer EBT was first passed as a permanent program in late 2022, states, Tribes, and Territories have quickly mobilized to design and implement the program to provide nutrition benefits to millions of children when school is out for the summer. While Summer EBT programs are designed to reach all eligible families, certain households face additional barriers to participation. These include foster youth, households without permanent or stable mailing addresses, Indigenous children, individuals with limited English proficiency, and families required to apply rather than being automatically enrolled. For these groups, accessing benefits can be significantly more complex to navigate.

In this brief, you'll find:

- ⚙️ Key populations facing additional barriers to Summer EBT access
- ⚙️ Common challenges to access and what worked across the first two summers of implementation
- ⚙️ Solution strategies, with state examples, organized by implementation area
- ⚙️ A look ahead at priorities and considerations for future program years

Key Populations and Identified Solutions

While each population has unique experiences accessing Summer EBT, especially in the program's first year of operation, many share similar barriers. States have pursued innovative approaches to address both universal challenges and those disproportionately affecting specific communities to improve enrollment and utilization. In 2025, as a result of these state solutions and an improved awareness of the program by families, administrative challenges eased.

In 2024, the first year of the permanent Summer EBT program, there were several common challenges across the country. Inaccurate or unstable mailing addresses delayed or prevented card delivery—creating greater barriers for foster youth and families experiencing housing insecurity—while limited awareness of the program, benefit timing, and application requirements led to confusion and missed opportunities. Complex eligibility rules further complicated access, leaving families uncertain whether their children were automatically enrolled or required to apply.

Additionally, housing-insecure families and foster youth often lacked reliable mailing addresses, making card delivery and communication harder. Households with limited English proficiency encountered inadequate translations and minimal culturally responsive outreach, leading to misinformation. Mixed-status families experienced fear and confusion about immigration status and confidentiality, discouraging participation. Indigenous families in Tribal communities were affected by unclear state–Tribal coordination, rural access barriers, and limited culturally appropriate outreach, resulting in lower participation rates. While challenges remained in 2025, improvements were made based on lessons learned from the program's first year, leading to stronger implementation overall.



Benefit Card Delivery Solutions



⚙️ Create and Communicate Opportunities for Families to Verify and Update Mailing Addresses

Obtaining up-to-date mailing addresses for eligible children is a universal challenge for Summer EBT administration, but it is more likely to impact Indigenous students and more mobile populations, including foster youth and unhoused students. For many Tribal communities, rural and remote geography, limited or inconsistent postal services, and nontraditional or community-based addressing systems mean that addresses on file with schools or state agencies are more likely to be outdated or incomplete. These same challenges—combined with frequent moves among foster youth and unstable housing situations for unhoused students—make it less likely that agencies have current mailing information. Inaccurate mailing addresses also create a significant administrative burden for Summer EBT agencies, which must manage returned EBT cards and undertake additional outreach to solicit new addresses.



To help address this challenge, **Illinois** is one of several states that have integrated a Summer EBT mailing address verification tool into their eligibility screener and application. When families input basic identifying information including their name, date of birth, and social security number or school, the tool shows a partial view of the address the state has on file. At this point in the verification process, families can only see the street number and not the full address in order to protect privacy and data security. If the address is incorrect, families are prompted to provide additional identity-proofing information (such as their case number) before updating their mailing address. The system automatically processes address changes when the provided information matches existing records, reducing administrative workload. If any discrepancies occur, a caseworker follows up directly with the family to verify and confirm the correct address before finalizing updates.

In **Arkansas**, informational flyers were distributed through the Department of Education and Head Start Directors to reach families in schools, and the Summer EBT application was made available directly at schools to increase accessibility. Additionally their state SNAP agency collaborated closely with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance and the Department of Education to convene regular meetings to coordinate outreach and address challenges in reaching hard-to-reach populations.



Offer Flexible Card Pick-Up and Early Issuance Options

A core component of successful Summer EBT administration is ensuring that EBT cards are received promptly by all eligible households, including those with unstable or changing addresses. Families experiencing homelessness, foster youth, and Tribal communities in particular face additional barriers to receiving cards through standard mail delivery due to frequent moves, incomplete address data, or unreliable postal service in rural areas.

To address these disparities, several states implemented flexible card distribution and early issuance strategies. In 2025, **Nebraska** allowed families without a fixed mailing address to request card pick-up at local offices by phone. **Washington** and **Illinois** partnered with schools to identify students who would benefit from school-based card distribution, ensuring families could access benefits directly in familiar community settings.

Additionally, foster youth represent a particularly mobile population, often changing placements and schools. Moves are especially frequent during the summer months when children may temporarily stay with another guardian, relative, or noncustodial parent. Early card issuance, paired with coordination through caseworkers who maintain up-to-date placement information, helps ensure timely access to benefits. **Missouri** mailed EBT cards to foster youth in their first batch of issuance to reduce the time between identifying the child's most recent mailing address and receiving the card. With this approach, they prioritize getting cards to children in foster care quickly to reduce the likelihood the child has moved to a new address before receiving it.

In **Maryland**, the Summer EBT agency collaborated closely with their state data teams and local human services offices to facilitate a coordinated handover of EBT cards for youth in foster care through caseworkers since they typically have more timely data on active cases and current addresses. These practices reduced delays and improved accuracy in reaching eligible children.

Recognizing the unique barriers for Tribal communities, some states have coordinated with WIC agencies to distribute cards at trusted local offices where families regularly engage with food and nutrition programs. This approach has provided a reliable alternative to traditional mail delivery, especially in rural and reservation areas.

Outreach and Communications



Leverage Technology and Partnerships to Provide Information and Materials in Multiple Languages

Children in households with limited English proficiency and immigrant families may face additional barriers to participating in Summer EBT. For example, there may be insufficient language translations to effectively communicate what the program is and who is eligible. Effective communication includes ensuring families understand the purpose of Summer EBT, how it works, and that benefits are available regardless of immigration status. This is especially important given that immigrant households may be hesitant to apply for programs tied to government agencies. To reach these populations, Summer EBT agencies are leveraging technology and partnerships to improve language access.



In 2025, **Oregon** added two QR codes to Summer EBT notices and outreach flyers which directed families to the English and Spanish Summer EBT websites. In 2026, an additional QR code will lead to a webpage called, "Help in Your Language," which will offer information about Summer EBT in each of Oregon's 10 most commonly spoken languages. This landing page will also include links to translated applications and flyers.

Virginia's Summer EBT agencies collaborated with private sector partners to translate their Summer EBT application into the 18 most commonly spoken languages among Virginia students and families.





Partner with McKinney-Vento Liaisons to Reach Students Experiencing Homelessness

McKinney-Vento liaisons are school or district staff members who work to identify students experiencing homelessness, ensure they are enrolled in school, and connect them to all eligible services that promote their academic success. By partnering with McKinney-Vento liaisons, Summer EBT agencies aim to more effectively reach unhoused students.



Oregon hosted a statewide call for McKinney-Vento liaisons to inform them about the Summer EBT program and encourage collaboration with local school points of contact to provide address updates and confirm which children were enrolled in migrant, homeless, or runaway programs during the 2024–2025 school year. In the future, Oregon is exploring opportunities for McKinney-Vento liaisons to serve as school points of contact, which would allow them access to the state’s Summer EBT school portal to make updates directly. They are also considering issuing cards for unhoused students to liaisons to facilitate direct card delivery to families.

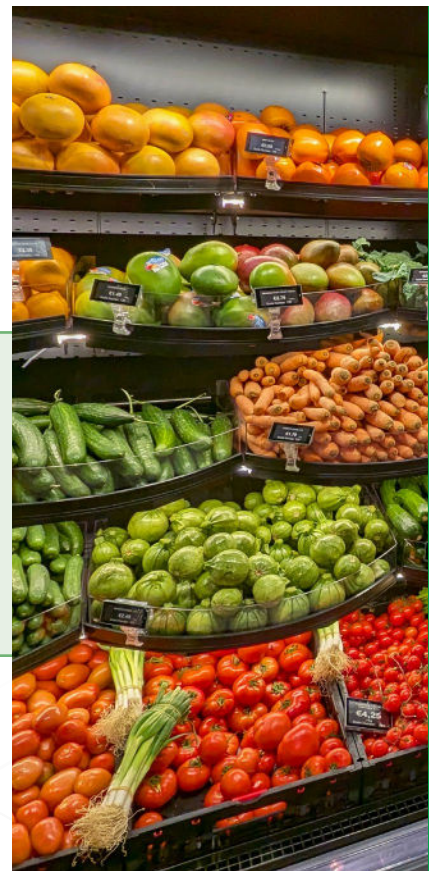
Massachusetts’ Summer EBT agency collaborated with the state’s Department of Education and McKinney-Vento liaisons to expand access to Summer EBT for students experiencing homelessness. The state provided multiple trainings for liaisons before the 2025 program launch to support effective outreach. Families can now opt in to the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) Connect application to have their EBT cards mailed directly to their school district’s homeless liaison. Liaisons handle card distribution, contact families for pickup, and submit receipt forms for recordkeeping. Massachusetts also established a dedicated communication mailbox for liaisons to contact the Summer EBT team with questions.

Collaborate with Tribes, Schools, and Community Partners to Reach Specific Populations

Summer EBT agencies across the country have partnered with schools, community-based organizations, and Tribes to better reach eligible children. These partners often have established relationships with the communities they serve and are trusted sources of information and support. Partnerships can help increase program awareness, dispel stigma, and boost participation among harder-to-reach households.

Several states have developed school-focused websites and toolkits to strengthen these efforts. For example, **Pennsylvania** operates pasebt.com, a dedicated portal that provides schools with guidance, data resources, and updates on Summer EBT implementation. Pennsylvania’s portal demonstrates how states can centralize resources for schools in one accessible location. Other states—including **Arizona, Kentucky, Michigan, Arkansas, and Nebraska**—have also created similar toolkits or portals.

Nebraska’s **SEBT School Outreach Toolkit** is a strong example, offering template outreach materials and instructions that schools can adapt to communicate directly with families.



In addition to school-focused resources, states leveraged broader partnerships. For example, **Illinois** worked with the Greater Chicago Food Depository to convene a network of community-based organizations that serve families experiencing homelessness, immigrants, youth in foster care, and students in Community Eligibility Provision schools, launching targeted outreach strategies.



Solutions for Summer EBT Reach and Impact



In 2025, **New Mexico** collaborated with Tribal agencies that administer the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) to encourage families enrolled in FDPIR to apply for Summer EBT benefits. **Oregon** worked closely with their Tribal Liaison and Tribal Communications Officer to develop a Tribal engagement strategy, update outreach flyers, expand information on the Oregon Department of Human Services Tribal Affairs website, and promote Summer EBT through Tribal communication networks.

Tribes in Oklahoma expanded outreach through multiple channels, including partnerships with Tribal, public, and charter schools, as well as community organizations that serve both Native and non-Native children. The **Chickasaw Nation, Cherokee Nation, Choctaw Nation, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and Otoe-Missouria Tribe** all conduct outreach across schools within their approved service areas to ensure broad awareness of Summer EBT.

These Tribes also partner directly with schools to obtain student data and issue benefits passively based on free and reduced-price meal eligibility determinations made by the schools, strengthening their ability to reach eligible Native and non-Native children effectively.

They also collaborate closely with one another, sharing approaches to food packages, policy, and day-to-day questions. These strong inter-tribal relationships are an important part of what makes Summer EBT work so well across Oklahoma.

Technology, Data, and Evaluation



Build Eligibility Screeners to Help Families Know if They Need to Apply

Although the vast majority of children eligible for Summer EBT are automatically enrolled, some families need to apply for the program. This is especially relevant for children who attend Community Eligibility Provision schools and Indigenous children who live in states that have not established FDPIR as a pathway for direct certification or who are part of a Tribe operating Summer EBT. Additionally, some families may already be automatically enrolled but believe they need to apply. This creates an unnecessary administrative burden for both families and Summer EBT agencies who must process redundant applications. To clarify who needs to apply, states like **New Mexico** and **Illinois** have developed eligibility screeners to help families determine their status and streamline the enrollment process.

Eligibility screeners guide families through a few short questions and quickly indicate whether they need to submit an application or if they are automatically enrolled. These tools can be made accessible online, through mobile devices, or embedded within existing benefits portals to increase ease of use. By providing instant, clear guidance that families can access independently,




screeners reduce the likelihood of families abandoning the application process or submitting unnecessary paperwork if automatically enrolled. Over time, this approach not only saves administrative resources but also serves as a strategic communication tool that clarifies the program for families and ensures that eligible children are connected to benefits more efficiently.




Use Data and Evaluation to Inform Program Administration and Outreach

Now that Summer EBT has been in operation as a permanent program for two summers, states are leveraging data, research, and analysis to better understand the program's reach in its first two years and identify opportunities to improve administration and access.

Beginning in 2025, **Oregon** was among many states who received benefit usage reports from their EBT vendor throughout the Summer Operational Period. These reports were used to inform new outreach strategies for populations who were not utilizing their benefits. The state used this data to remind families to spend their benefits before they expired and provided clear instructions on how to request a replacement EBT card if needed.



New Mexico collaborated with its Tribal partners who administer FDPIR to establish FDPIR as a direct certification pathway for Native American students. The state is currently building its database to receive FDPIR data for the 2026–2027 school year. In the meantime, New Mexico analyzed data from approved Summer EBT applications to assess program reach in Tribal areas during summer 2025.



Illinois partnered with the Greater Chicago Food Depository to conduct research with families to better understand the unique challenges they faced accessing Summer EBT in 2024. The state used these findings to inform program administration for 2025 and future operations.

Looking Ahead

As Summer EBT continues to mature, states are focusing on strengthening coordination between agencies and partners to ensure every eligible child can access benefits. Clear, proactive communication will be especially critical moving forward. With major policy changes on the horizon—especially shifts in SNAP and Medicaid eligibility under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R. 1)—families may experience a significant increase in the volume of program notices and eligibility communications they receive. In this environment, Summer EBT outreach can easily get lost or misunderstood if messaging is not clear, timely, and coordinated.

These policy shifts also mean more families may no longer be automatically enrolled in Summer EBT through their SNAP participation, which has historically been a primary connector for free and reduced-price meals, Community Eligibility Provision participation, and streamlines Summer EBT enrollment. As a result, households that have never needed to take action to access Summer EBT before may be required to complete applications or respond to school or agency outreach. Without clear communication, families risk missing deadlines, misunderstanding their eligibility, or assuming they are still automatically enrolled.

This reinforces the importance of consistent, transparent messaging across agencies and trusted partners to help families understand what has changed, what actions they need to take, and where they can seek help.

To support clearer communication, improving school data collection and data sharing across agencies will be essential for long-term success. Building more accurate, connected databases will help states identify eligible children more efficiently, reduce administrative errors, improve program integrity and accuracy, and enhance the customer experience for families. Strengthening these systems over time will create a more responsive foundation for delivering Summer EBT benefits.

As states plan for 2026 and subsequent program years, ongoing coordination and refinement will be key to maintaining effective Summer EBT operations. Continued investment in data quality, interagency collaboration, and communication with families and partners will help states navigate policy changes and ensure accurate benefit delivery. By building on early lessons and system improvements, states can strengthen the program's administrative foundation and support consistent access for all eligible children.

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