



COORDINATING SNAP & NUTRITION SUPPORTS **IMPACT REPORT**

— ILLINOIS —

Background & Context

Through the Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) initiative, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and the Greater Chicago Food Depository partnered to strengthen access to nutrition supports, particularly Summer EBT, by improving data systems, cross-agency coordination, and outreach to eligible families.

Illinois serves a large and diverse population across urban, suburban, and rural communities, each with distinct needs and challenges. Families often navigate complex and fragmented systems across education, human services, and community-based organizations, which can make it difficult to access available supports. Barriers such as inconsistent data systems, variations in school- and district-level processes, language access challenges, and limited awareness of available programs can prevent eligible families from receiving benefits.

Building on previous partnerships and lessons learned from the administration of Pandemic EBT, Illinois used the CSNS project as an opportunity to modernize its student data infrastructure, strengthen coordination between the state's education and human services systems, and refine outreach methods to prepare for the state's implementation of Summer EBT in 2024 and build upon lessons learned for implementation in 2025 and beyond.



Project Description

The Illinois CSNS project focused on strengthening the implementation of Summer EBT (also known as SUN Bucks) through a combination of community engagement, technology modernization, cross-agency collaboration, and targeted outreach. Recognizing that eligible children can miss out on benefits due to fragmented data systems, inconsistent eligibility information, and limited awareness of available programs, the project sought to improve how students and families are identified, informed, and connected to nutrition supports. By pairing investments in data infrastructure and eligibility systems with community-informed outreach and engagement strategies, Illinois worked to increase access to Summer EBT while building a stronger foundation for future nutrition program coordination.

Key Objectives

-  Strengthening data systems and cross-program coordination to improve alignment between SNAP, school meal programs, and Summer EBT, modernizing eligibility and application processes, and reducing gaps in benefit access.
-  Improving identification of eligible students and families by addressing limitations in student- and household-level data and enhancing eligibility determination and direct certification processes.
-  Increasing awareness, access, and participation in nutrition supports through community-centered outreach, communications, and the integration of community voice into program design and service delivery.

UNDERSTANDING ILLINOIS' DATA SYSTEMS

To support SNAP, school meals, and Summer EBT, Illinois relies on many interconnected data systems:



HEA (HOUSEHOLD ELIGIBILITY APPLICATION)

New statewide application process managed by ISBE for free and reduced-price school meals. This process centralizes application approval at the state level, replacing the previous system in which applications were submitted and processed locally. Once approved, applications are uploaded into ISBE's certification systems to support eligibility determinations.



WINS (WEB-BASED ILLINOIS NUTRITION SYSTEM)

Online platform used by Illinois schools and child care centers to report meal counts and submit reimbursement claims under federal and state nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

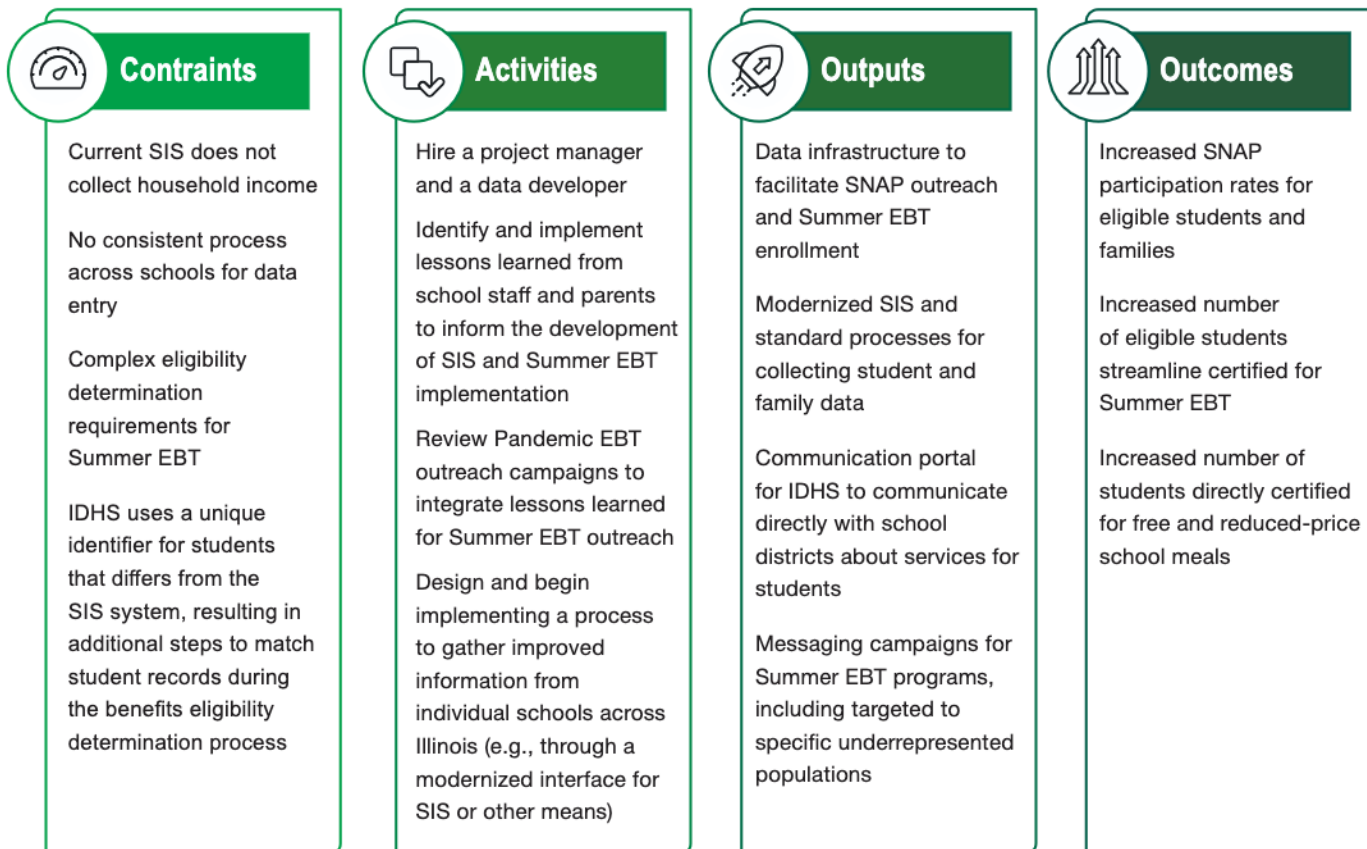


SIS (STUDENT INFORMATION SYSTEM)

Illinois' statewide student data system, which stores student-level information such as enrollment and demographic data and serves as a key source for matching students across systems.

The CSNS project team worked to integrate these data sources through the development of the WINS Eligibility system, a centralized, statewide database that combines data from IDHS, ISBE, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and schools to support direct certification, household income verification, and Summer EBT eligibility determination.

Logic Model



Approach

Illinois' project consisted of two primary components: data and systems alignment and community collaboration. Given evolving federal guidance, short implementation timelines, and the need to engage communities to increase awareness and uptake, these two components were closely intertwined. While much of the project focused on improving backend systems used to identify and connect eligible families to benefits, the team also worked to ensure that those systems and processes were informed by community experiences and supported by effective outreach and engagement. While Summer EBT program details were still being finalized, the team adopted an iterative approach, building systems and processes that could be refined over time. This allowed Illinois to respond to emerging federal guidance while laying a strong foundation for long-term system improvements.

“

Community partnerships—especially with parents who have lived experience navigating food insecurity and public benefit systems—were central to shaping our first-year evaluation of Summer EBT in Illinois. Our approach ensured that the program assessment reflected real family experiences and that recommendations were grounded in the needs, perspectives, and priorities of those most directly affected.”

Data & Systems Alignment

Illinois focused on strengthening data infrastructure, eligibility processes, and cross-agency coordination to improve how students and families are identified and connected to nutrition supports.



DATA SHARING & SYSTEMS COORDINATION

To support Summer EBT implementation and broader nutrition program alignment, the Illinois team invested significant time and effort into cross-agency collaboration and strengthening the data infrastructure needed to successfully share information across agencies and systems. This work required agencies to not only establish data-sharing agreements, but also align their definitions and business processes, evaluate system capabilities and limitations, identify critical data elements, and develop data governance structures for securely exchanging information across multiple platforms.

Through this work, the team identified opportunities to improve data quality, enhance matching processes, and reduce gaps in eligibility determination. The project also supported collaboration with ISBE data staff to develop recommendations for improvements to the Student Information System (SIS), including more consistent collection of household information, improved alignment between systems, and more frequent enrollment updates.

This initial investment laid the foundation for a more coordinated and efficient eligibility system. By building and strengthening the necessary relationships, governance structures, and technical infrastructure needed to support data sharing, Illinois positioned itself to more effectively connect eligible families to Summer EBT, school meals, SNAP, and other nutrition supports both during and beyond the CSNS project period.



DEVELOPMENT & IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WINS ELIGIBILITY SYSTEM

A major component of this project was the development of the WINS Eligibility system as a centralized, statewide database. Prior to this project, eligibility information for school meals, direct certification, and Summer EBT was maintained across multiple systems, creating challenges for data matching, program administration, and identifying eligible students. NICE was designed to bring these data sources together into a single platform that could support more accurate and efficient eligibility determination. This system integrates data from multiple sources including the SIS, IDHS eligibility systems, and school-reported household information, to support direct certification for Summer EBT and broader program coordination for agency staff, school district staff, and families.

Beyond supporting Summer EBT implementation, the WINS Eligibility system establishes a long-term foundation for more coordinated nutrition program administration in Illinois. By creating a centralized eligibility system, the state can more efficiently identify eligible students, reduce duplicative administrative processes, improve data quality, and strengthen its ability to connect families with nutrition supports.



SUMMER EBT APPLICATION & CUSTOMER TOOLS

The project also focused on improving customer-facing and administrative tools to support Summer EBT implementation. For summer 2024, IDHS launched a customer-facing Summer EBT screener where households could verify information, check eligibility, learn about the program, and understand how to update key household details such as addresses. Receiving more than 200,000 views, this portal represented an important step toward benefit transparency and ownership for customers, while also reducing reliance on call centers. On the agency side, IDHS developed an enhanced individual matching logic for the Summer EBT load process and a dedicated Summer EBT sub-module within staff systems. Together, these efforts improved both the customer and staff experience and laid the foundation for a more integrated, data-driven approach to delivering nutrition supports.

Community Collaboration

Recognizing that improved systems alone are insufficient to ensure participation, particularly with a new program with evolving guidance, the Illinois team placed a strong emphasis on outreach and community engagement. Working with the Greater Chicago Food Depository and other community partners, the team worked to ensure families were aware of available benefits and that services were accessible, trusted, and responsive.



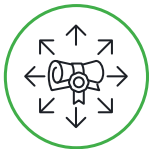
EXPANDING OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Building on successful multilingual campaigns developed during Pandemic EBT implementation, partners created a phased statewide communications and outreach strategy. The CSNS project team and key partners focused early efforts on awareness and foundational information, hosting webinars, developing FAQs and a digital communications toolkit, coordinating with state leaders, and supporting media outreach efforts. This phase approach allowed the team to update communications materials as federal guidance evolved to ensure families and partner organizations had access to accurate and timely information.



SUMMER EBT 2024 INSIGHTS RESEARCH

The Food Depository partnered with Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), an organization specializing in community engagement and evaluation, to better understand family and staff experiences during the first year of Summer EBT implementation in Illinois. This work included parent listening sessions, a school nutrition staff survey, and a community-based organization survey. Feedback from these efforts directly informed program improvements to eligibility notices, multilingual communications, outreach strategies, and implementation planning. The team also prioritized closing the feedback loop by sharing how community input influenced decisions, helping to build trust and strengthen ongoing engagement.



SUMMER EBT 2025 CAPACITY GRANTS

To extend outreach into communities facing unique barriers, the project team awarded \$125,000 in Summer EBT Capacity Grants to six community-based organizations¹. These organizations furthered the goals of the CSNS project, supporting awareness and enrollment efforts among populations including children in immigrant or mixed-status households, youth experiencing homelessness, and students attending Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools. These grants helped build local capacity while ensuring outreach efforts were grounded in trusted community relationships.

Results

The Illinois CSNS project resulted in key advancements in data integration, cross-sector coordination, and community engagement, strengthening the state's ability to connect eligible families with nutrition supports.



ENHANCED DATA INFRASTRUCTURE & INTEROPERABILITY

The development of the WINS Eligibility system, alongside broader system improvements, significantly strengthened Illinois' ability to identify and serve eligible families. By creating a centralized database to integrate eligibility data across SNAP, school meals, and Summer EBT, the state strengthened data-sharing processes and improved alignment between education and human services systems. In 2024, ISBE shared more than 926,000 student records with IDHS to support eligibility matching and Summer EBT implementation. Through this process, the team identified nearly 80,000 students who were not initially known to IDHS or did not match existing records, highlighting the importance of improved data integration and the potential to connect additional eligible children to benefits. As systems continue to mature and data quality improves, the team anticipates that matching rates will continue to strengthen over time. Together, these efforts reduced reliance on manual applications, positioned Illinois to more proactively connect families to benefits, and freed up staff time to focus on more meaningful customer interactions while providing benefits to 1,252,572 children in 2024 and 1,136,906 children in 2025.

¹ The organizations who received mini-grants were Beyond Hunger, Chicago Coalition to End Homelessness, Chicago Youth Circus, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), Northern Illinois Food Bank, and Southwest Organizing Project.



CROSS-AGENCY & CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION

The project strengthened collaboration across IDHS, ISBE, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, and community partners, leading to stronger communication channels, a deeper understanding of partner and system constraints, and more coordinated approaches to implementation. This coordination was critical in navigating evolving federal guidance and tight timelines for Summer EBT implementation. Partnerships with community organizations and schools extended the reach of the project and supported a more integrated approach to addressing food insecurity. Together, these strengthened relationships created a lasting foundation for continued collaboration, future systems integration efforts, and ongoing improvements to nutrition program delivery.



COMMUNITY VOICE, OUTREACH, AND ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement played a critical role in shaping Summer EBT implementation and outreach strategies. To better understand the experiences of families and frontline staff, the project supported four parent discussion groups, a school nutrition staff survey with more than 130 respondents, and a community-based organization survey with more than 40 respondents. Feedback from these efforts informed revisions to eligibility notices, multilingual communications, outreach materials, and implementation planning. The project also invested in statewide awareness and outreach efforts, including webinars, communications toolkits, and digital resources.

The Illinois team responded to the community's need for clear communication and accessible information. The Summer EBT screener and information portal received more than 200,000 views in a single year, demonstrating both strong demand for information and the value of accessible, customer-facing tools. By incorporating community voice throughout the project lifecycle, Illinois strengthened program design and service delivery while building trust among families, community organizations, and state agencies. The project demonstrated that engaging communities as partners can improve both program effectiveness and participation.

Lessons Learned

-  **Plan for iteration, not perfection.** Implementing complex, cross-system initiatives, particularly those involving new programs like Summer EBT, requires ongoing refinement. Evolving federal guidance, system constraints, and operational realities made it difficult to implement all desired improvements in a single program year. Illinois found it critical to begin system modernization early, anticipate the need for multiple iterations, and build in time for continuous adjustments informed by staff and community feedback.
-  **Strong cross-agency relationships are just as important as technical tools.** Effective implementation depended not only on data systems, but on strong collaboration between IDHS, ISBE, and community partners. Clear communication, shared understanding of constraints, and sustained coordination across partners were essential to navigating changing requirements and ensuring alignment across systems.
-  **Community voice must be designed into the design process, not added on.** Engagement with families and community partners directly shaped key aspects of the project, including eligibility notices, outreach strategies, and communications materials. Incorporating community voice throughout the process strengthened program design and service delivery by ensuring solutions reflect real needs while building trust between communities and government systems. Partnering with trusted organizations and closing feedback loops helped ensure that insights were not only gathered but meaningfully incorporated into decision-making.
-  **Outreach is especially challenging when program details are evolving.** Rolling out communications while program requirements were still being finalized created challenges for both the state and its partners. Illinois addressed this by adopting phased communications, regularly updating materials, and preparing partners to share evolving information with families.
-  **Community-based organizations are critical messengers, but their capacity is limited.** CBOs played a central role in reaching families and supporting enrollment, particularly for populations facing unique barriers to access. However, their capacity is often limited. Providing funding, training, and flexible timelines was essential to enabling effective outreach and engagement.

Sustainability & Improvement

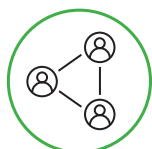
Illinois is committed to sustaining and building on the systems, partnerships, and practices developed through the CSNS project. Through this work, Illinois established a more efficient, responsive data infrastructure, strengthened cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration, and embedded community engagement practices that will continue to support nutrition program administration and benefit access.

Key elements of sustainability include:



CONTINUED ENHANCEMENT OF DATA INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYSTEMS

The development of the WINS Eligibility system, improvements to SIS and WINS data flows, and the creation of new Summer EBT eligibility and matching processes established a stronger foundation for identifying eligible students and connecting families to benefits. Illinois will continue refining these systems to improve data quality, interoperability, and program administration.



ONGOING COLLABORATION BETWEEN EDUCATION, HUMAN SERVICES, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The project strengthened relationships between IDHS, ISBE, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, and other community-based organizations, creating stronger communication channels and a shared understanding of program operations. These partnerships will continue to support implementation, problem-solving, and future program innovations.



CONTINUED INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY-CENTERED OUTREACH AND CO-DESIGN

The evaluation, outreach, and community engagement frameworks developed through the project established new ways of incorporating family and partner feedback into program design and implementation. Illinois will continue to leverage these approaches to ensure communications, outreach strategies, and program improvements reflect the experiences and needs of families.

Through the CSNS project, the Illinois team created a more integrated and responsive nutrition support system that combines data and systems improvements with community-informed program implementation. By continuing to invest in systems modernization, partnerships, and community engagement, Illinois is better positioned to effectively connect eligible children and families with the nutrition supports they need.

Key Takeaways

- 1** Strong partnerships between government agencies and community organizations enhance both system design and program delivery.
- 2** Outreach and communications remain essential to ensuring that eligible families access available benefits.
- 3** Investments in data infrastructure and coordination create lasting improvements that extend beyond a single program or initiative, but they require more time.

Project Library

[Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports \(CSNS\) Cohort 2 Case Study – Illinois: Strengthening Connections to Nutrition Benefits for Children Through Improved Technology and Data Sharing](#)

-

Co-published by APHSA's Process Innovation team and Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry Campaign Center for Best Practices team, with contributions from Blake Turpin and Miranda Lauzon, respectively.
For more information, contact Blake Turpin, Senior Process Innovation Associate, at bturpin@aphsa.org, or Miranda Lauzon, Senior Manager, Benefits Access, at mlauzon@strength.org.