



FRAC Facts: Direct Certification for Free School Meals

Households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Food Stamp benefits, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance can bypass the standard application process and be “directly certified” for free school meals. With direct certification, families do not have to fill out a paper application to be processed by the school for determination of eligibility. Instead, agencies share information with schools, through data matching and other mechanisms, to identify eligible children and automatically enroll them for free school meals. All school districts are required to directly certify children that receive SNAP/Food Stamp benefits by fall of 2008.

While research shows that direct certification is an effective, efficient way to enroll eligible families in the school meals program, improvements in implementation are needed to connect more children to those meals. Current data show that direct certification is missing about 30 percent of the eligible children. Recommended state and local level efforts to assess current direct certification systems are outlined below. Advocates who undertake these and other strategies can inform state policy makers about additional efforts and resources necessary to improve the direct certification process.

BENEFITS OF DIRECT CERTIFICATION

- Reduces paperwork burden on families and schools by removing the need for a paper application.
- Increases the likelihood that eligible children receive school meals benefits – studies have shown that direct certification is effective in ensuring that more eligible children are enrolled for school meals.
- Removes families that are directly certified from further application verification procedures, which is beneficial because this can result in families losing their benefits due to communication barriers.
- Strengthens the school meals programs – studies have found direct certification to be a highly accurate enrollment method, so expanding direct certification can help build support for the programs.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Data matches are conducted at the state level with easy access by local school districts.** Creating a data match at the state level is recommended because 1) many individual counties and districts lack the resources to support efficient computer data matching on their own; and 2) relying on paper systems, such as mailing letters to families’ homes, are less likely to be effective in ensuring that all eligible families are directly certified.
- **Data matches are updated at least monthly and school districts regularly check for newly eligible students.** A data match conducted only at the beginning of the school year misses many children in families that move or start receiving food stamps during the school year. Updating matches monthly can assure access for the very vulnerable families who experience temporary housing problems or other hardships during the school year.
- **Families are notified of their enrollment for free school meals and don’t need to return a letter or other paperwork to the school.** Requiring families to return a mailed form can run into problems with incorrect addresses and language and literacy issues. Families who have already gone through the rigorous food stamp enrollment process should be spared any additional paperwork burden.
- **USDA’s direct certification guidance, which includes links to additional information is on-line:** www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Policy-Memos/2008/SP_27-2008.pdf



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ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

- **Assess the current system** by comparing the number of children directly certified to the number of children in households receiving food stamps during the month in which direct certification was conducted. This will show how many children who could be directly certified are actually being enrolled for free meals through this method. First, ask the state agency that administers the school meals programs for the number of children who were directly certified in a given school year. Second, ask the food stamp administering agency for the number of school-age children in households receiving food stamps. Then, compare the two figures for a rough calculation of the percentage of children eligible for direct certification that are being reached. Take this valuable data to state and local officials who are responsible for improving direct certification systems.
- **Facilitate a joint meeting with the State agencies that administer the SNAP/Food Stamp and school meals programs** to review current systems at the state and local levels. Having a third party, such as an advocate, request such a meeting can be helpful in pushing it higher on busy agendas. The agencies are required by federal statute to have a written agreement which establishes procedures for direct certification. A USDA memo detailing the contents of the agreement can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Reauthorization_Policy_04/Reauthorization_04/2005-04-19.pdf. A review of the agreement is a good place to start for this meeting. Look at what systems are in place and what still needs development. Use this opportunity to review or obtain data from the different agencies and for developing a common understanding of the current situation and goals for system improvement. An annual or bi-annual meeting of this group could help monitor progress during the phase-in period for direct certification at all school districts.
- **Create a state advisory committee** to support the state agencies' efforts to build a better direct certification system. Depending on the results of the smaller meeting with the two state agencies, consider bringing in other key players for a state-level advisory committee to tackle factors undermining an effective system. This can increase the synergy for changing complex bureaucratic systems.
- **Obtain funds from state or federal sources for improved data management systems.** Funds may be available at the state level through a variety of sources. Funding could be discussed in a state advisory committee meeting or an individual meeting with the state agencies. Generating outside stakeholder support to advocate for funding could make the difference in getting a state appropriation. On the federal level, USDA has grant funds available to help states improve their systems. For more information on the USDA grants, go to www.fns.usda.gov/fns/grants.htm.

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