



## Opportunities for Schools to Assist in Disasters Through the Federal Child Nutrition Programs

In the aftermath of a disaster, school districts can provide critical nutrition support to students through the school, summer, and afterschool nutrition programs. When a major disaster declaration is issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has the authority to waive program requirements that limit access to meals in situations resulting from damage or disruptions due to natural or man-made disasters, or other exceptional emergency situations. These include, but are not limited to, hurricanes, tornadoes, wild fires, and floods. School districts can work with their state child nutrition agency and USDA to apply for waivers from program requirements that would otherwise limit students' access to meals. Below are some examples of the ways that the child nutrition programs have helped schools respond to the nutritional needs of children impacted by a disaster.

### Offering School Breakfast and Lunch at no Charge

USDA, working with the state child nutrition agency, has allowed a number of school districts to provide free meals to all students in areas hard-hit by disasters. The length of these waivers has varied depending on the extent of the disaster. Districts that have received this type of waiver include Houston after Hurricane Harvey, New York City after Hurricane Sandy, and districts in 48 counties in Florida, including Miami-Dade, after Hurricane Irma.

### School Meals Eligibility

Children experiencing homelessness are eligible for free school meals. Children displaced due to a disaster meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless, making them categorically eligible for free meals. Pursuant to current policy for qualifying homeless children for free school meals, school officials have been able to keep lists documenting children who are impacted to qualify them for free meals in lieu of collecting individual applications. See the [USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#) for more information.

Children in households receiving Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) benefits (which can be provided to [families](#) in disaster situations) are categorically eligible for free school meals and can be directly certified through the SNAP agency or through a school meal application. Once a student has been certified for free or reduced-price school meals, they remain eligible for the entire school year and up to 30 days in the next school year (until a new eligibility determination is made).

### **Summer and Afterschool Site Eligibility**

School districts may be able to operate the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Seamless Summer Option when schools or child care facilities must be closed due to disasters. School districts also can work with their child nutrition agency to get pre-approval of a plan to serve meals in the event of a disaster in order to accelerate their ability to respond. Approval of sites also can be expedited.

USDA may waive the requirement that a school district documents each summer or afterschool meal site is in a low-income area if existing eligible sites are damaged and need to be relocated to areas that are not eligible.

School districts also have worked with their child nutrition state agency to waive the requirement that SFSP sites may not be located at schools during an unanticipated school closure.

Flexibility for summer and afterschool meal sites in disasters has been granted to Shasta County, CA, during the Carr Wildfire.

### **Meeting the Meal Pattern Requirements**

USDA also has waived meal pattern requirements, allowing schools to serve meals that ordinarily would not meet federal nutritional guidelines. This flexibility has been granted in the school, summer, and afterschool nutrition programs when certain items, such as milk, were unavailable after the disaster. Districts in 35 Georgia counties Georgia received this waiver after Hurricane Irma in 2017.

For more information, see [USDA's policy guidance on disasters and the child nutrition programs](#) and its [Food Assistance for Disaster Relief](#).