

# Ideas....Policies....Programs....Solutions

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## Special Edition

### Summary

- Two nationwide programs **Pandemic Electronic Transfer Benefit (P-EBT)** and **Summer EBT** (also known as SUNBUCKS), operated by the United States Department of Agriculture-Food and Nutrition Services (USDA-FNS) were established to help the millions of American families that struggle daily with food insecurity. P-EBT was a COVID relief program for children that missed meals due to school closings. Summer EBT is a new program now entering its third year; its purpose is to provide low income families with \$120 per child to cover the cost of breakfast and lunch during the summer months when schools are closed. Both programs were approved by Congress with bipartisan support.

## *\$1.3 Billion Unspent: Helping Millions of Americans Struggling with Food Insecurity*

- P-EBT and now Summer EBT are USDA cash transfer programs that allow eligible families to use a card to purchase food at their local grocery store. However, each new government program has unique rules and distribution methods; one unintended results is that people will fall through cracks. Eligible families end up not spending the money they are entitled to under the law. The main reason for \$1.3 billion sitting on the table unspent: eligible families simply did not know the money was there.
- **The challenge:** how to launch a nationwide campaign to alert food insecure families that there was money sitting on the table waiting to be spent. We filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests with states to get exact amount of unspent funds, wrote policy papers, worked with reporters to get stories covered and alerted local stakeholders to the unspent funds including school districts, anti-hunger organization and elected officials.



## 1. Pandemic EBT (P-EBT):

- The P-EBT story began in the spring of 2023, when we first recognized the issue of unspent dollars here in New York. A FOIA request with NYS-Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) showed that hundreds of thousands of New York families had not spent a single dollar of their latest PEBT dollars (\$391 per eligible child for Summer 2022 disbursement). The problem is that families had misplaced, lost or thrown away their P-EBT card mainly because they did not know that more dollar distributions were still coming. If a family lost their P-EBT card, they could still contact OTDA and get a Replacement Card (same procedure for every state). We contacted school officials in NYC, Rochester, Buffalo to alert them that they need to renew their publicity efforts to parents of their school children. The NYC-Department of Education then launched a publicity campaign for all of its 1800 schools. P-EBT dollars have a strict nine-month deadline; if none of the money is spent within nine months, it stays with the Federal Government.
- We then asked what was happening with unspent P-EBT dollars in other states. If there were millions of unspent dollars in NYS and NYC, then it was quite possible that other states had the same issue. USDA-FNS maintains a monthly database that shows much in P-EBT was distributed each month by state. But the USDA database does not show how much of the money actually got spent so far and how long before the nine months expungement deadline kicks in. To document the exact amount of dollars sitting on the table waiting to be spent, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests were made with 30 states. Most states responded with sending the data showing unspent P-EBT or Summer EBT dollars amounts based on the FOIA data requested (see chart on page 4).
- When the unspent P-EBT dollar amounts from each state (based on our FOIA request) were added up, the totals were surprisingly high. Close to \$820 million in unclaimed P-EBT. In state after state, millions of dollars had never been claimed, ranging from \$240 million in NYS, 160 million in California, \$60 million in Oklahoma and \$16 million in Ohio. While the dollars were still active, they were set to expire soon if not spent.
- Why was there so much money sitting on the table unspent? With P-EBT, families were not aware that a COVID-19 program was still active with two more cash distributions (Summer 2022 and Summer 2023). To spend down the last two distributions, a family had to keep their P-EBT card from year to year (or request a Replacement Card). While publicity around P-EBT was everywhere at the height of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, it had faded away by 2023. School Districts had stopped letting families know about the latest P-EBT benefit and most importantly- *to keep their card for future use*. Many families had lost or misplaced their P-EBT card.



## 2. Summer EBT

- As P-EBT was winding down with its last payments going out in 2024, we began to focus on the newly launched [Summer EBT](#) program (also known as SUNbucks). Summer EBT eligibility requires that a child attends a school that operates the free lunch program and verification that the household is low income. The Summer EBT program gave \$120 per child to cover the cost of breakfast and lunch during the months of July and August when schools are closed. A policy alert on how the lessons P-EBT can help ensure a successful Summer EBT rollout was posted. In the summer of 2024, the Summer EBT program was rolling out for its first year. Most families were automatically eligible due to receiving SNAP or Medicaid; they did not have to do anything to receive the \$120 per child benefit. However, according to the USDA-FNS around 20% of all families had to prove income eligibility by submitting an application before the state deadline.
- Even though it's a new program, Summer EBT has shown high rates of usage; but even 20% unclaimed means \$700 million never getting spent on meals for children. Just as with P-EBT, we closely studied Summer EBT regulations, identified issues, undertook the research and posted three policy alerts that analyzed and documented the extent of unspent dollars along with practical recommendations for getting the money into people's pocketbooks. Similar to P-EBT, our concern was how many families know they are eligible but have to submit an application to receive the benefit.
- To gauge how serious the issue of eligibility by application was, FOIA requests were sent to most of the Summer EBT participating states. The FOIA request asked how many families submitted an application during the summer of 2024. The FOIA results showed that only a tiny handful of eligible families had submitted an application during the first summer the program was operating.



## 3. P-EBT/Summer EBT Media and States Advocacy Campaign

- The next step was launching a national media campaign to alert eligible families to spend down their P-EBT or Summer EBT dollars. The challenge was how to get the word out in each state before the expungement deadline kicked in. DRA prepared a [policy alert](#) along with state specific FOIA data was prepared for media outlets in each state with a P-EBT or Summer EBT spending deadline coming up. News reporters were contacted in each of these states. Along the way, we learned of the [States Newsroom](#), a nationwide network with reporters working all 50 states, devoted to digging deep muck racking journalism. Smaller independent local news organizations as well as major city newspaper (the [Cleveland Plain Dealer](#), [St. Louis Post Dispatch](#), [the Oklahoman](#)) also ran articles.

- The P-EBT and/or Summer EBT news story was covered by investigative reporters in [New York](#), [Ohio](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Missouri](#), [Louisiana](#), [Nebraska](#), [South Carolina](#), [Colorado](#), [Nevada](#), [Kansas](#) and [Wisconsin](#). Most of the articles were published in media outlets that allowed republishing (no paywall). The first article was immediately followed by other media outlets posting the same article. It was common to see as many as 10 to 20 media outlets in the same state letting its readership know about unclaimed P-EBT or Summer EBT dollars! National coverage appeared in [Chalkbeat](#) and [The 74](#).
- **Stakeholders outreach:** School district officials and statewide anti-hunger organizations were contacted by email encouraging them to help get the word out on the unclaimed dollars. School Districts are the most strategic partners since a school has both most current home address for all of its students and the most direct ways of communicating with parents (email, text, flyers, backpacks). The responses we received were encouraging and rewarding; these stakeholders promised to renew their efforts to publicize the unspent P-EBT and Summer EBT dollars<sup>1</sup>. Outreach was also targeted to elected officials, anti-hunger and community organizations.

#### 4. Lessons Learned/Next Steps

- While P-EBT is no longer available since it was a COVID relief program, the Summer EBT is now in full swing with congressional authorization for at least 10 years. The program has been a huge success with around \$2.5 billion distributed in 2025. There are still two challenges: 1) several hundred thousand eligible families must submit an application each year; 2) hundreds of thousands of eligible families received the benefit but did not use it. To maximize its full potential, publicity efforts must begin early and stay strong in 2026. Since Summer EBT eligibility is based on a child attending a school that offers the free breakfast/lunch program, School Districts are best positioned to alert their families about the Summer EBT program.



Chart 1: P-EBT Unspent Dollars Before Expungement Deadline

State	FOIA Letters Documented Unspent/Still Active P-EBT Dollars	FOIL Response Received
New York	\$303,000,000.	Yes
California	\$168,000,000	Yes
Pennsylvania	\$27,200,000	Yes
Florida	\$71,600,000	Yes
Missouri	\$35,000,000	Yes
Nebraska	6,601,000	Yes
Oklahoma	\$62,000,000	Yes
Louisiana	16,100,000	Yes
North Carolina	18,700,000	Yes
Ohio	\$15,700,000	Yes
Massachusetts	\$15,400,000	Yes
Arizona	\$33,191,599	Yes
South Carolina	\$13,300,000	Yes
Iowa	\$5,801,160	Yes
Indiana	\$25,167,000	Yes
<b>TOTAL P-EBT</b>	<b>\$821,959,759.00</b>	

Chart 2: Summer EBT: Sampling of States by Summer EBT Applications Submitted During the Summer of 2024 (FOIA Requests)

States Sampling	Potential Applications	Applications Submitted	Percentage applications submitted	Total Potential Dollars
Arizona	110,000	4,926	4.4%	\$13,200,000
Colorado	67,400	25	.003%	\$8,088,000
Connecticut	54,600	3,173	5.8%	6,552,000
Kansas	138,000	5,686	4.1%	\$23,160,000
Louisiana	118,800	10,973	9.2%	\$14,256,000
Massachusetts	103,000	21,635	21%	12,360,000
Maryland	100,000	12,978	13%	12,000,000
Minnesota	82,400	221	.26%	\$9,888,000
Missouri	218,000	24,299	11%	\$26,160,000
Nebraska	35,000	3,103	8.8%	\$4,200,000
New York	282,000	17,158	6%	\$33,840,000
Nevada	70,400	6,347	9.0%	\$8,448,000
New Mexico	44,600	4,088	9.1%	\$5,352,000
North Carolina	193,600	37,374	19.3%	\$23,232,000
Ohio	167,400	6,801	4%	\$20,088,000
Pennsylvania	233,200	7335	3.1%	\$27,984,000
Washington	101,400	10,429	10.2%	\$12,168,000
Wisconsin	80,200	3,566	4.4%	\$9,624,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,200,000</b>	<b>180,117</b>	<b>8.1%</b>	<b>\$270,600,000</b>

Chart 3: Summer EBT 2025 Applications Deadline Tracking Chart

States	USDA: Total estimated children eligible for Summer EBT (thousands)	20% Factor/Estimate of Summer EBT Applications Households (thousands)	Summer EBT 2025 Application Deadline
Alabama	545	109	August 15
Arkansas	315	63	August 25
Arizona	550	110	August 5
California	3,851	770.2	September 2
Colorado	337	67.4	September 3
Connecticut	273	54.6	August 15
District of Columbia	80	16	August 25
Delaware	80	16	August 31
Hawaii	100	20	August 3
Illinois	1,145	229	August 13
Kansas	266	53.2	August 29
Kentucky	600	120	August 15
Louisiana	594	118.8	August 8
Massachusetts	515	103	September 7
Maryland	500	100	August 31
Maine	63	12.6	August 15
Michigan	836	167.2	August 31
Minnesota	412	82.4	August 31
Missouri	429	85.8	August 31
Montana	68	13.6	June 30
North Carolina	968	193.6	August 31
North Dakota	40	8	August 28
Nebraska	175	35	August 15
New Hampshire	39	7.8	August 26
New Jersey	540	108	August 31
New Mexico	223	44.6	August 19
Nevada	352	70.4	August 10
New York	2,027	405.4	September 4
Ohio	837	167.4	August 15
Oregon	294	58.8	September 3
Pennsylvania	1,166	233.2	August 31
Rhode Island	66	13.2	August 31
Utah	198	39.6	August 31
Virginia	791	158.2	August 30
Vermont	35	7	August 29
Washington	507	101.4	August 31
Wisconsin	401	80.2	August 28
West Virginia	202	40.4	August 20
<b>Total</b>	<b>20,420,000</b>	<b>4,084,000</b>	