

CACFP

Child and Adult Care Food Program

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a core federal food assistance program that **supports the nutritional needs of young children** and their families in early education and care settings. Through participating in the program, family and center-based child care providers and emergency shelters can get reimbursed to help cover the costs of providing nutritious foods to children in their care. Each year, CACFP helps provide **4.7 million children with the healthy meals and snacks they need** for healthy growth and development.

Despite high costs of food and strong evidence demonstrating the importance of healthy nutrition in early childhood, **CACFP is underutilized, and many eligible child care providers do not participate in the program.**

Nationally, recent estimates suggest only 36.5% of eligible child care providers participate in CACFP.*

Well-documented challenges and barriers keep participation rates down, including:

- **Administratively burdensome paperwork** that providers do not have the time or resources to complete
- **Inadequate reimbursement rates** that do not keep up with the rising cost of food
- **Tiered reimbursement levels** that provide a lower level of support to family child care providers

Children's HealthWatch research shows that among low-income families, **children who attend a child care that participates in CACFP** are more likely to **be food secure, be in good health, and less likely to be sick enough to be admitted to the hospital from the emergency department.****

Every year, CACFP provides **162 million meals and snacks** in thousands of care, shelter, and after school programs:

- 45K child care centers
- 69K family child care providers
- 27k afterschool programs
- 321 emergency shelters



Greater investment in CACFP is needed to match the costs of providing nutritious food and supporting young children's health and development. This is especially true in this political moment, as child care providers and families alike are grappling with rising, unpredictable food costs, and reduced or eliminated safety net benefits.

*Andreyeva T, Moore TE, Godoy L da C, Kenney EL. Federal Nutrition Assistance for Young Children: Underutilized and Unequally Accessed. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2024;66(1):18–26. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2023.09.008

**Ettinger de Cuba S, Bovell-Ammon A, Ahmad N, et al. Child Care Feeding Programs Associated With Food Security and Health for Young Children From Families With Low Incomes. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. 2023;123(10):1429–1439. doi:10.1016/j.jand.2023.06.003

Preliminary Research Findings: CACFP Has Room for Improvement

With a well-documented gap in CACFP participation, we wanted to hear directly from professionals in the field:

- **What are the barriers and facilitators to providing healthy foods and habits for young children?**
- **How do providers perceive their role in young children's dietary intake & habits?**

From November 2025 to February 2026, we conducted **17 1:1 interviews and focus groups** with **center-based and family child care providers, non-profit child care leaders, early education and care policy experts, and state administrators**. Interview questions explored participants' perceptions and experiences at the intersection of child care and nutrition.

CACFP-related findings include:

Participating in CACFP incurs substantial **administrative burdens** for child care providers.

Child care providers feel oversight of CACFP is intrusive, and **not reflective of the day-to-day realities** of caring for young children.

Child care providers are **severely financially constrained** by the costs of food.

There is **widespread desire** to align nutrition guidelines with health promotion and to make them more culturally inclusive, yet **necessary training and reimbursement for child care providers to reach these goals are insufficient**.

*Preliminary qualitative results are one half of a mixed-methods study, generously supported by the Gisela B. Hogan Charitable Foundation.

Pediatrician-Approved Policy Recommendations

"You basically are bean counting child by child, how much can your parents afford?"

– Early Education Consultant

Eliminate reimbursement tiering

Reimburse all center and family child care providers through state funding at the same, highest amount for each meal and snack. While long term federal solutions are necessary, this will allow states to better support small/family providers in the short-term.

"I've been asking other states...no one has any good waivers that they've found. You know, it's just a really hard program to administer."

– State Administrator

Review added state requirements

Over time, many states have added extra rules and administrative processes for CACFP participation, over and above the federal requirements that now feel like status quo. States can conduct a thorough review to ensure each added requirement helps to achieve the program's mission – without unnecessarily hindering provider participation. Longer-term federal streamlining is also needed.

"If we want to be lowering childcare costs, we have to be talking about how we're supporting programs [that provide] food."

– State Administrator

Dedicate state funds to support family child care networks

These networks help family child care providers pool administrative resources, creating economies of scale and efficiency while participating in programs like CACFP.

