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SUNBUCKS

Reducing Hunger, Strengthening Futures: The Case for Ensuring Every Child in Mississippi Has Access to Summer Meals

Food is not a privilege, but a right. In Mississippi, approximately one in four children face hunger.¹

Fighting hunger shouldn't be a hard decision to make.

Despite having one of the highest poverty rates and child poverty rates in the nation, Governor Tate Reeves opted out of the federal summer food service program for children, or SUN Bucks, in 2024 which would have helped feed students during the summer months while school is not in session.

What is SUN Bucks?

- SUN Bucks is a federally funded program that provides grocery benefits to eligible families during the summer months.
- The goal of the program is to help families provide meals for their children during the summer, when kids do not have access to the free or reduced-price meals they normally receive during the school year.
- SUN Bucks would have provided families with a total of \$120, or \$40 monthly per child, during the 2024 summer months.²⁻³
- Although the program was federally funded, states had to provide half of the administrative costs to implement the program.

What states are eligible to participate in the SUN Bucks program?

All states can participate in the SUN Bucks program. While joining was optional, the USDA strongly encouraged states to recognize the benefits it could offer children.⁴



Despite the benefit SUN Bucks would bring to children, some states decided not to participate.

- A total of 13 states did not participate, leaving approximately 10 million children in the U.S. hungry. ⁵
- Five of those state are in the southeastern region of the country: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida.
- The other states not participating include Idaho, Wyoming, South Dakota, Iowa, Wyoming, Utah, Alaska, Texas, and Oklahoma.



All children in Mississippi deserve access to food during the summer; participating in SUN Bucks would even help the economy.

- SUN Bucks would've served approximately 324,000 children in Mississippi and brought around 38 million in benefits to MS in 2024. ⁶
- - In addition, Mississippi could've received an estimated economic impact of \$58,320,000 to \$69,984,000. ⁷



To help mitigate the impact of the governor's decision to opt out of the summer feeding program and ensure children have access to the food they need during the summer months, state lawmakers should consider:

- Directing the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) to identify and secure 50% of the funding for administrative costs to opt into the SUN Bucks program in future years, ensuring consistent access to nutritious summer meals for children statewide.



Other state policies and programs in Mississippi aimed to reduce poverty and hunger by addressing the root causes of poverty and providing direct support to individuals and families with low-incomes include:

- **SNAP**
Temporarily increasing state-administered Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for families with school-aged children during the summer months.
- **TANF**
Increasing TANF benefit levels and expanding eligibility in order to support family needs, including food, housing, and job training programs.
- **EITC and CTC**
Implementing a state Eamed Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) to increase the take-home pay of working Mississippians, lifting more families out of poverty.
- **Medicaid**
Expanding Medicaid to ensure more families have access to health care, reducing financial strain and supporting overall well-being.
- **Housing**
Expanding affordable housing, rental assistance programs, and homeownership support to reduce housing insecurity for low-income families.
- **Education programs**
Expanding funding for early childhood education programs and K-12 support to ensure children from low-income families have the resources needed to thrive.
- **Minimum wage**
Creating a state minimum wage law that ensures families have a livable wage.

¹"Map the Meal Gap." Feeding America, May 2024, www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/mississippi

²"The SUN Bucks Program Would Reduce Summer Hunger in Mississippi." Food Research & Action Center, December 2023, https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Summer-EBT-State-Fact-Sheets_MS.pdf.

³"Sun Bucks (Summer Ebt)." Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, www.fns.usda.gov/summer/sunbucks.

⁴Id

⁵Belsha, Kalya. "Here's Why at Least 13 States Won't Be Offering New \$120 Food Benefit to Kids This Summer." Chalkbeat, 11 Jan. 2024 www.chalkbeat.org/2024/01/10/why-some-states-are-opting-out-of-new-summer-ebt-program/

⁶"The SUN Bucks Program Would Reduce Summer Hunger in Mississippi."

⁷Id