



FY27-28 Advocacy Agenda

Advancing the Future of the CACFP





Strengthening CACFP for Children, Families, Providers and Communities

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is one of the nation's most effective investments in child nutrition, food security, quality child care and support for working families. The CACFP provides nutritious meals and snacks to millions of children and adults each day while serving as a critical source of financial support for child care centers, family child care homes, at-risk afterschool programs, emergency shelters and adult day care programs.

Research shows that access to healthy meals during the first five years of life supports positive long-term health and learning outcomes.¹ Good nutrition early in life is linked to proper cognitive, emotional and social development, physical health and lifelong well-being. Children who have adequate nutrition during early childhood are more likely to have a healthy Body Mass Index and have a reduced risk of obesity and diet-related diseases. Nutrition in early childhood is also connected to brain development, and those who receive proper nutrients are more likely to perform well in school, have better cognitive abilities and be more skilled at problem-solving. Early childhood nutrition has also been linked to better mental health outcomes and supports the emotional well-being of children as they grow and develop.

Action Needed to Strengthen the CACFP

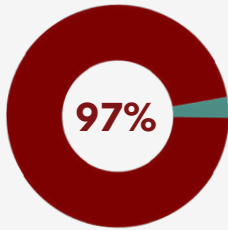
Despite its **proven benefits**, the CACFP continues to face **participation challenges** driven by increasing costs, insufficient reimbursement, administrative complexity and workforce shortages.^{2,3} The National CACFP Association (NCA) believes every eligible child and adult should benefit from the support and nutritious meals provided by the CACFP. Enhancing the quality and impact of the program requires federal and state action to modernize policies, reduce barriers and strengthen support for providers and sponsoring organizations (Sponsors).

Every child and adult in America
should be nutrition secure.



Member-Driven Priorities

With overwhelming support from members nationwide, NCA has identified a focused policy agenda to advance the future of the CACFP. Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents rated these priorities as important, signaling broad consensus around the need for meaningful program improvements and stronger support for participating organizations and the families they serve.



97% of survey respondents rated these priorities as important.

NCA calls for policymakers to:

1. Make reimbursement fair and equitable.
2. Reduce administrative and paperwork burden.
3. Support improvements in administrative funds for Sponsors.
4. Ensure fair program integrity processes.
5. Expand program access.
6. Support the child care infrastructure and working families.
7. Enhance state-level support for the CACFP.



“For many families, the CACFP helps ease the stress of food insecurity. Parents know when they leave their children with us that we are providing breakfast, lunch and a snack. We also ensure that the meals we provide are full of the nutrition that they need because we don’t know what they have at home.”

- CACFP Sponsor

Preserving a Vital Nutrition Resource for Home-Based Child Care

Family child care homes are uniquely positioned to support children and families. These providers serve children in small, nurturing environments that often offer flexible hours for parents working non-traditional schedules. They are also a critical source of child care in rural communities, child care deserts and underserved communities.

The CACFP plays an essential role in helping family child care providers offer nutritious meals while maintaining affordable care for families. Research consistently demonstrates that nutritious meals improve children's health, development and readiness to learn, while food insecurity is associated with poorer educational and developmental outcomes.

However, USDA data show that **only about 67% of eligible family child care homes participate in the CACFP**, leaving many children without access to the nutrition benefits the program provides.³ Research has identified inadequate reimbursement, complex administrative requirements, and limited Sponsor availability as key barriers to participation.

Family child care homes face particular challenges because they operate as small businesses. Providers often serve as caregivers, educators, cooks and administrators simultaneously. NCA research and member feedback show that documentation requirements, compliance responsibilities and meal claiming procedures frequently consume time that could otherwise be spent on quality program planning.

To strengthen the CACFP in family child care homes, federal and state policymakers should:



Increase reimbursement rates to better reflect the actual cost of serving CACFP meals.



Eliminate inequities created by the tiering system.



Provide reimbursement for an additional meal or snack.

“The CACFP is more than just a meal program. It is a lifeline for countless children across our state and country.

For many families, especially those facing financial hardship, the meals provided through the CACFP may be the only consistent, nutritious food their children receive in a day. These meals are not just filling stomachs; they are fueling minds, bodies and futures.”

- CACFP Advocate

33% of eligible family child care homes DO NOT participate in the CACFP.



**39% of eligible
child care
centers DO NOT
participate in
the CACFP.**



Supporting Centers Amid Rising Costs and Growing Demand

Child care centers, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, adult day care programs, and emergency shelters serve millions of nutritious meals and snacks to children and adults each day. Participating centers provide **healthier meals and snacks**, and are recognized as higher-quality care environments that support children's growth, development and school readiness.⁴

Today's centers face unprecedented financial pressures. Food costs, labor expenses, utilities, insurance and facility costs have risen sharply, while many providers continue to operate on thin margins. These challenges emerge at a time when families are already struggling with child care affordability and programs are working to maintain access to care.

Although CACFP reimbursement is intended to offset meal costs, USDA's Second Study of Nutrition and Activity in Child Care Settings (SNACS-II) found that reimbursement falls short of the true cost to provide meals. According to SNACS-II, **reimbursement covered only 26% of the total cost of breakfast, 35% of lunch costs and 21% of snack costs** when labor and food expenses are considered.⁴ As costs continue to rise, the gap between reimbursement and actual expenses threatens the financial sustainability of participation.

Participation barriers extend beyond reimbursement. CACFP operators and administrators frequently cite administrative complexity as a major obstacle to enrollment and retention. Requirements related to eligibility determinations, meal claiming, monitoring and documentation create burdens that can discourage participation, particularly for smaller centers with limited administrative capacity.

At the same time, participation remains below its full potential. National research indicates that **only 61% of eligible child care centers participate in the CACFP**, demonstrating substantial opportunities to expand access to nutritious meals for children.³

To strengthen the CACFP in centers, policymakers should:



Increase reimbursement for every meal and snack by 10 cents.



Provide reimbursement for an additional meal or snack.



Allow annual eligibility for for-profit centers.



Reduce administrative burden through modernization and streamlining.



**More than
14 million
children live
in households
experiencing
food
insecurity.**

Closing the Hunger Gap After the School Day Ends

For millions of children, hunger does not end when the school bell rings. Afterschool hours can be one of the most vulnerable periods of the day for children experiencing food insecurity. The CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Meals Program helps fill this gap by providing nutritious meals and snacks in safe, supervised environments that support learning, enrichment and healthy development.

The need for afterschool meals remains significant. **More than 14 million children live in households experiencing food insecurity**, and millions leave school each day uncertain where their next meal will come from.⁵ Yet participation remains far below need. According to the Food Research and Action Center, only **one in sixteen** children who receive free or reduced-price lunch participates in an afterschool meal program.⁶

Afterschool programs do far more than serve food. They provide safe environments for children while parents work, support academic achievement, reinforce positive youth development and strengthen community connections. Meal service is often a critical component of sustaining participation in these programs and ensuring children are ready to learn and succeed.

Despite the program's benefits, many eligible organizations do not participate due to administrative complexity, limited awareness, operational challenges and funding constraints. Expanding participation would allow more communities to provide nutrition support to children outside of school hours.

To strengthen CACFP afterschool meals, policymakers should:



Reduce the area eligibility test from 50% to 40%.



Allow At-Risk Afterschool to operate year-round.



Allow non-congregate feeding in At-Risk Afterschool.

**Only One in Sixteen
Children Who Receive
Free or Reduced-Price
Lunch Participates in
an Afterschool Meal
Program.**



Strengthening the Backbone of the CACFP

Sponsors are the infrastructure that makes CACFP participation possible for thousands of providers nationwide. While Sponsors operate largely behind the scenes, they play a vital role in connecting children and adults to nutritious meals by supporting family child care homes, afterschool programs and centers. Sponsors recruit providers, conduct monitoring visits, provide training and technical assistance, process reimbursement claims, ensure regulatory compliance, and serve as a critical link between participating programs and State agencies.

Yet Sponsors are facing growing challenges. Over the past several years, the CACFP has experienced a decline in the number of Sponsors, a trend that has continued to accelerate. NCA's research found that insufficient reimbursement, increasing administrative requirements, program complexity and leadership retirements have all contributed to Sponsor attrition. As Sponsors leave the program, providers lose access to critical support, making recruitment, retention and expansion more difficult.

At the same time, expectations placed on Sponsors continue to increase. Sponsors are responsible for extensive oversight activities, training, record review, technical assistance and compliance monitoring while also adapting to new regulations and reporting obligations. Many Sponsors report that administrative funding has not kept pace with inflation, rising labor costs or the growing complexity of program administration.

A study from USDA conducted 20 years ago found that administrative funding was already lagging behind the actual costs associated with administering the CACFP.⁷ Since this study was released, Sponsors' administrative responsibilities have continued to increase along with the costs associated with those responsibilities, without a boost in administrative funding. This funding gap limits their ability to hire and retain qualified staff, expand services and reach new providers.

Investing in Sponsors is one of the most effective ways to strengthen CACFP participation and program quality. Research demonstrates that administrative burden is a significant barrier to participation, and Sponsors help providers overcome these barriers through hands-on support and technical assistance. A strong community of Sponsors helps improve access, increase compliance, support meal quality and make participation feasible for providers who otherwise lack administrative capacity.

To strengthen the administration and sustainability for the CACFP, federal and state policymakers should:



Strengthen administrative funding for Sponsors.



Provide state-level funding to help Sponsors cover administrative costs.



Allow Sponsors to conduct off-site monitoring.



“Our role as Sponsors is to lift providers up, support them and make sure that they have everything that they need to continue to go above and beyond.”
- CACFP Sponsor



A Bold Vision for the Future of the CACFP

Healthy habits do not begin in kindergarten. They begin at birth, shaped by the foods children eat and the environments in which they learn and grow. The Child and Adult Care Food Program is one of our nation's most powerful tools for establishing healthy eating patterns during these critical early years, helping put children on a path toward lifelong health and success. As policymakers consider the future of child nutrition, they must recognize that investing in the CACFP is investing in healthier children, stronger families and more resilient communities. The evidence is clear: when we support quality nutrition from the very beginning, we create lasting benefits that extend far beyond childhood. Now is the time to strengthen and invest in the CACFP so that every child has the opportunity to build healthy habits from day one.

Children cannot learn when they are hungry, providers cannot sustain quality programs without adequate support and families cannot thrive without reliable care and nutrition services. Strengthening the CACFP means strengthening the systems that providers and families rely on every day.



Congress, USDA, State agencies, Sponsors, providers and advocates must work together to strengthen the CACFP.

The FY27-28 Advocacy Agenda focuses on practical reforms that will improve program sustainability, reduce barriers, expand participation and ensure children and adults continue to receive nutritious meals in supportive care settings.

Together, we can build a CACFP that is adequately funded, administratively efficient, accessible to all eligible participants, and equipped to meet the needs of children, families, providers and communities for years to come.

“Joining the CACFP is one of the most rewarding investments you can make because it fuels every part of a child’s day. When children have access to consistent, high-quality meals, you will see a remarkable shift. By participating in the CACFP, you aren’t just feeding kids, you’re nourishing their potential, ensuring that every child is ready to thrive.”
- CACFP Head Start Provider



End Notes:

- ¹ Caroline, C. (2023). The impact of early childhood nutrition on long-term health outcomes. *J Child Adolescent Health*. 2023; 7(4): 161
- ² Adams, G., Hernandez, F. (2021). The Child and Adult Care Food Program and home-based child care providers expanding participation. Urban Institute.
- ³ Franckle, R., Boyle, M., Eiffes, B., Schochet, O. (2024). USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program participation by U.S. providers. Prepared by Mathematica, Contract No. 12319819A0006/12319823F0028. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support
- ⁴ Forrestal, Sarah, Maria Boyle, Rachel Bleiweiss-Sande, Rebecca Franckle, Mindy Hu, Jennifer Kali, Theresa Neelan, and Katherine Niland (2025). Second study of nutrition and activity in child care settings: summary of findings. Report submitted to the Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Chicago, IL: Mathematica, July 2025.
- ⁵ Rabbitt, M.P., Reed-Jones, M., Hales, L.J., Suttles, S., & Burke, M.P. (2025). Household food security in the United States in 2024 (Report No. ERR-358). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <https://doi.org/10.32747/2025.9458834.ers>
- ⁶ Hayes, C. (2025). Afterschool suppers: A snapshot of participation in October 2024. Food Research & Action Center. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/afterschool-report-2025.pdf>
- ⁷ Pettigrew, i., Kuchak, J., Ghelfi, L. (2006). Administrative costs in the Child and Adult Care Food Program: results of an exploratory study of the reimbursement system for sponsors of family child care homes. Resources International and ORC Macro.