

**Pandemic EBT: “It has Meant Everything”  
A Snapshot of Michigan’s Pandemic EBT Program**

*“It has helped us tremendously because without SNAP/Pandemic EBT we probably wouldn’t have food to eat or have to choose between paying bills or eating.”*

Michigan was the first state to implement the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program (Pandemic EBT). The state’s successful efforts to quickly provide \$300 million in nutrition benefits to nearly 900,000 children highlights the critical role that the new program can play in supporting families and keeping hunger at bay, as well as the need for Congress to take steps to continue the program and to strengthen it so it can support struggling families who are being impacted by the economic crisis created by COVID-19. The Michigan experience also provides an important roadmap for program implementation.

### **Pandemic EBT Basics**

Created by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Pandemic EBT was designed to provide nutrition resources to families who lost access to free and reduced-price school meals when schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. States agencies had to create plans to implement the new program, and the plans were approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Because this program is administered by the states, the details and implementation of each program varies. Importantly, some states were able to move quickly and started the program in March and April.

*“It has been a great help to receive the benefit especially with the children being out of school since March and I’ve been laid off work since March as well and also have had a hard time getting unemployment so at least I’ve been able to purchase food.”*

### **Why Pandemic EBT?**

- When schools closed in response to COVID-19, 22 million low-income children lost access to the free and reduced-price school meals that their families relied on to keep hunger at bay. Millions more children have become eligible for free school meals as their parents have lost jobs and wages.
- The pandemic has hit families with children particularly hard, with one in three households struggling to put food on the table.
- Pandemic EBT provides families an EBT card with the value of free school breakfast and lunch (about \$5.70 per child) for each day that school was closed, giving the family the resources that they need to purchase food for the household.

### **Michigan In Focus**

Michigan was the first state to have its plan to establish a Pandemic EBT program approved by USDA. The program was run through the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in collaboration of the Michigan Department of Education. DHHS distributed the funds through its SNAP infrastructure, an existing system that supported customer service and made it easier to provide benefits to new families.

Families in Michigan were not required to submit an application or fill out any forms. Instead, school districts sent eligible student information to the Michigan Department of Education. The State maintains a database of every child's information, including their eligibility for NSLP and their address. They shared this information with the Department of Health and Human Services.

For those children in households not already receiving SNAP assistance, households were sent a Pandemic EBT card. They did not require an application, and parents did not need to fill out any forms to determine eligibility. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services was able to distribute the first round of cards in April. Families received \$376.20 in total per eligible child (which provides benefits for the number of days that schools closed due to the pandemic during the 2019-2020 school year). The program distributed over \$300 million dollars to children in need by the end of May. The speed at which these funds were disbursed has helped families put food on the table.

Propel fielded a national and Michigan specific survey through its FreshEBT program to better understand how families were experiencing Pandemic EBT. FreshEBT is a product from Propel that allows SNAP recipients to check their balance, find retailers, and track their benefits. It is used by 3 million people nationwide. Nationwide, 34.5% of SNAP users reported skipping meals, while 25.4% of Pandemic EBT recipients in Michigan reported skipping meals. Though 34.3% of SNAP recipients reported relying on food pantries, 29.4% of Michigan Pandemic EBT recipients reported relying on food pantries. This indicates that Pandemic EBT reduced food insecurity for families.

*"It is why [my] children are able to eat the same amount of meals as they were while school was going. You don't realize how much that breakfast and lunch means until they are at home everyday and you have to provide it."*

## The Path Forward

- **Extending P-EBT through fiscal year 2021.** The need for continued social distancing requires a continuation P-EBT, and it needs to be flexible enough to provide nutrition resources to support families who rely on free and reduced-price school meals as schools move to hybrid and online models in the coming school year;
- **Reduce administrative burdens wherever possible.** FNS and the states should prioritize broad access to P-EBT. Limiting recertification requirements and providing only one benefit level simplified the administration of Michigan's program, which contributed to its success. Emphasizing access and simplicity in execution will reduce barriers both for states and for families. Families who are hit by the economic crisis and never received benefits before might have difficulty navigating this process. Administrative burdens should not stand in the way of supporting and effectively serving families.
- **Providing funding to cover the state administrative costs of operating P-EBT.** Administrative funding is provided to states to operate the school nutrition and child care food programs. P-EBT is meant to replace those programs, but it does not trigger the state child nutrition administrative funding, and states do not have the resources to absorb the administrative costs of operating P-EBT.
- **Increase benefit levels overall.** For families that were already receiving SNAP, P-EBT benefits have been a critical lifeline. As food prices continue to rise, increasing benefits overall will protect children and families from experiencing hunger. These families are already facing difficult circumstances, and increasing food budgets is one way to make sure they are not left in need.