



JB Pritzker, Governor

Dulce M. Quintero, Secretary Designate

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DATE: 12/31/24

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable John F. Curran, Senate Minority Leader
The Honorable Don Harmon, Senate President
The Honorable Tony McCombie, House Minority Leader
The Honorable Emanuel "Chris" Welch, Speaker of the House

FROM: Dulce Quintero
Secretary Designate
Illinois Department of Human Services

*Dulce Quintero
by Amishaar*

SUBJECT: Illinois Commission to End Hunger 2024 Report

The Illinois Department of Human Services respectfully submits the Illinois Commission to End Hunger 2024 report on behalf of the Office of the Secretary in order to fulfill the requirements set forth in Statute 096-1119.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Sophie Milam, Special Policy Advisor at the Greater Chicago Food Depository, at smilam@gcfd.org.

cc: The Honorable JB Pritzker, Governor
John W. Hollman, Clerk of the House
Tim Anderson, Secretary of the Illinois Senate
Legislative Research Unit
State Government Report Center



2024 YEAR IN REVIEW

In fall of 2023, the Illinois Commission to End Hunger gathered in a classroom at Liberty Elementary School in Cicero to reflect on progress made toward our mission of ending hunger and the work still to be done. During that meeting, Governor Pritzker called on the Commission to accelerate efforts to address child hunger.

Children are at increased risk of hunger relative to other populations. 15.7% of children in Illinois live in food insecure households.¹ Nationally, food insecurity among households with children is twice as high among Hispanic families (26%) and African American families (27.5%) as it is among White families (13.3%).²

Children are also especially susceptible to the negative impacts of hunger. Hunger, especially when experienced in the early years, can have negative impacts on cognitive development and educational attainment as well as physical and mental health:³

- Nutrition during a child's first 1,000 days of life are paramount in determining neurodevelopment, lifelong mental health, and child and adult physical health.⁴
- Academically, food insecure children are less likely to perform well in school and more likely to have lower math scores and poorer grades.⁵ Further, children experiencing hunger are more likely to have to repeat a grade, receive special education services than low-income children who do not experience hunger.⁶
- Children who are food insecure experience more physical and mental health challenges, including exhibiting more behavioral issues.⁷

In response, the Illinois Commission to End Hunger focused its efforts in 2024 on advancing important opportunities to better connect children to the nutrition they need. This report provides an overview of progress made toward addressing child hunger.

SUMMER EBT

In December 2022, Congress passed legislation to make it easier for school-aged children to access food during the summer when school is out. In 2024, the Illinois Commission to End Hunger worked to support strong implementation of these new opportunities for Illinois children.

Historically, low-income children have been able to access nutrition assistance only through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). But program limitations made it difficult for children to access summer meals. SFSP provides meals to low-income children distributed at participating program sites. However, sites are not always open every day of the week or every week of the summer. Furthermore, not every community has a SFSP site. Illinois has over 8,000 school lunch program sites, but only 1,800 summer meal sites. Even in communities that have a program, children often lack transportation to get there. School buses take children to school during the school year, but there is no infrastructure to get them to a summer meal site while parents are working. As a result, only about 11% of children in Illinois who received school lunch during the school year accessed a summer food site in FY2019, leaving tens of thousands of Illinois children without the nutrition they need to thrive.⁸

By contrast, the new federally-funded Summer EBT program was designed to support families in their existing daily routines. Summer EBT provides families with a debit card to purchase groceries during the summer, replacing the meals that low-income children would have otherwise received at school. Because families can redeem Summer EBT cards at the same grocery store where they typically shop for food, they don't need to make a special trip. And because Summer EBT is not dependent on a program site, children can access benefits all summer long, in every community in the country.

IDHS and ISBE worked together with the Illinois Commission to End Hunger to implement Summer EBT in Illinois for the first time in summer 2024. Implementation of the new program required a significant amount of work. IDHS and ISBE collaborated on the state's operating plan, which was submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for approval in February 2024. The two agencies also worked to develop data sharing protocol and processes for verifying the eligibility of children enrolled in qualifying programs and build an online Summer EBT application.

The Illinois Commission to End Hunger led a statewide awareness campaign to educate families about the new program, who was eligible, and how to enroll. The campaign included both direct-to-client strategies and strategies leveraging CBOs across the state to do outreach.

The awareness campaign officially kicked off in April 2024 with statewide trainings for community-based organizations to support awareness building; benefits outreach organizations to support application assistance; and elected official offices to support constituent services.

Awareness and outreach materials were made available in print and digital formats and in multiple languages.⁹ Materials included social media tiles, flyers, program FAQs, and an outreach toolkit with sample text message campaigns, robocall scripts, newsletter articles, and more.

The Illinois Commission to End Hunger also launched a neighbor-facing website, [WeGotYouIllinois.org](https://www.wegotyouillinois.org), to educate families about the full range of nutrition programs available to them, including the new Summer EBT program. From June to August 2024, we aired radio PSAs for over 9.5 weeks in partnership with the Illinois Broadcasters Association. The PSAs broadcasted on media markets statewide, and included 30 second and 60 second ads in both English and Spanish. We also launched targeted search and social media ads in English and Spanish.

Lastly, The Illinois Commission to End Hunger and the Governor's Office worked with the federal US Department Of Agriculture (USDA) to [publicly launch the program](#) here in Illinois, by organizing a press conference at Enos Elementary School in Springfield to further build public awareness. Governor Pritzker stood alongside USDA Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services Deputy Undersecretary Stacy Dean, Illinois Department of Human Services Secretary Dulce M. Quintero, Illinois State Superintendent Tony Sanders, Illinois State Sen. Sue Rezin, Greater Chicago Food Depository CEO Kate Maehr, and district and school leadership to celebrate program implementation and share key informational resources for families.

In its first year in operation, Illinois's Summer EBT program reached over 1.2 million low-income children statewide.¹⁰

SCHOOL BREAKFAST

Increasing access to school breakfast has a direct positive impact on students' cognition, academic performance, and school attendance.

Providing breakfast to students at school through School Breakfast Programs improves children's performance on mathematical tasks, vocabulary tests, demanding mental tasks, and reaction to frustration. Further, providing breakfast at school improves their concentration, alertness, comprehension, memory, and learning.¹¹

Children who eat breakfast at school — closer to class and test-taking time — perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home.¹² Students who eat breakfast score 17.5% higher on standardized tests.¹³

Breakfast is also associated with students making fewer trips to the school nurse and attending more school days per year¹⁴, which is important because students who attend class more regularly are 20 percent more likely to graduate from high school.¹⁵

Despite the many benefits of school breakfast, Illinois is ranked 35th in the nation when it comes to school breakfast participation.¹⁶ Only about half of income-eligible Illinois students who receive free or reduced-price lunch are eating school breakfast (44.2%).¹⁷

Various barriers may make it challenging for children to participate in a traditional breakfast served in the cafeteria before class starts. Some children may face transportation barriers, for example if the school bus does not arrive in time to eat a cafeteria meal before the school day begins. Other children may face stigma associated with arriving early to school to access a free or reduced-price meal.

Breakfast After the Bell models have been shown to increase the number of students that eat breakfast by overcoming participation barriers:

- Breakfast in the Classroom: Meals are served in the classroom. Students take 10-15 minutes to eat in the classroom with their peers after the school day starts.
- Grab and Go: Students pick up a breakfast to take on the way to their first class. This allows students to eat at different locations and after the first bell.
- Second Chance: Students eat breakfast in between their first and second classes. This can either take place in the cafeteria or on the go.

In 2024, legislation was introduced in the General Assembly to fund a competitive grant program to help schools start or expand Breakfast After the Bell programs. This effort was successful, and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) worked to implement the program in summer 2024. The grant opportunity was announced in October with an application deadline of November 14, 2024. Grant awards will be made up to \$7,000 per each eligible school and will be announced in late 2024.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS AND CHILDREN (WIC)

WIC is a federally-funded program aimed at promoting the health of qualifying low-income women and young children. WIC provides supplemental foods, breastfeeding support, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women; infants; and children under the age of five who are found to be at nutritional risk.¹⁸ WIC participation supports nutrition and health and has been shown to have significant positive impacts on nutrition, health, and cognition.

Despite the strong and lasting benefits of WIC participation, Illinois enrollment in WIC lags significantly behind participation in other states. As a result, each year, Illinois leaves federal dollars on the table that could be utilized to support the nutrition and health of low-income women, infants, and children.

In 2022, only 39.4% of eligible Illinois residents were enrolled in WIC. Like most states, WIC participation is lower among children ages 2-4. While participation rates are high among infants (72%), participation drops off significantly after age 1 (41.6%).¹⁹

Given the high enrollment in WIC among Illinois infants, Illinois has an opportunity to increase WIC participation by focusing on retention. Research conducted jointly by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the Greater Chicago Food Depository with WIC families and local WIC agencies in 2022 revealed specific areas of opportunity:

- WIC participants most commonly thought that income is the main factor in determining WIC eligibility, with less awareness of how the age of the child impacts eligibility, including the fact that eligibility extends to the child's fifth birthday. Many focus group participants thought of WIC as an infants-only program. WIC recipients also shared that they think of WIC as a food package program rather than a health intervention program, with limited understanding even among WIC participants of program benefits like breast feeding support and nutrition education.²⁰
- WIC agencies reported limited bandwidth and training to develop awareness materials, with a desire for customizable materials that they could use to engage families, either directly or in collaboration with local partners trusted by families with young children, like pediatricians and early learning centers.²¹

In 2024, the Illinois Commission to End Hunger developed outreach and awareness materials based on these and other learnings to increase WIC retention and participation. The campaign includes print and digital assets, including posters, flyers, pamphlets, and social media tiles all available in English and Spanish. The materials emphasize the value of WIC beyond food and beyond infancy and showcase diverse family types, including single dads, grandparents caring for grandchildren, multiracial families, and LGBTQ families. The campaign also includes sample social media posts, sample newsletter articles, and images to support local WIC agencies in building out their own

engagement strategies. A program fact sheet was made available in 8 languages to help WIC agencies engage community members for whom English is not their first language.

In spring 2024, IDHS asked WIC agencies to complete a commitment form with the local partnerships they planned to build to help increase WIC retention and participation. Additionally, in July 2024, IDHS implemented a new requirement that each Illinois WIC agency have an MOU in place with their local Head Start for cross-program promotion. Illinois Commission to End Hunger print and digital materials were distributed to 79 WIC agencies across the state in fall 2024.



ENDNOTES

¹ Map the Meal Gap 2024, Feeding America (May 2024). <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/child/illinois>

² Rabbitt, M. P., Reed-Jones, M., Hales, L. J., & Burke, M. P. (2024). Household food security in the United States in 2023 (Report No. ERR337-). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <https://doi.org/2024.8583175/10.32747.ers>

³ Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on our Nation, Feeding America <https://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/child-economy-study.pdf>

⁴ Schwarzenberg, Sarah Jane, and Michael K. Georgieff. "Advocacy for Improving Nutrition in the First 1000 Days to Support Childhood Development and Adult Health." *Pediatrics* 141, no. 2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.3716-2017>

⁵ Food Insecurity And Health Outcomes, Gundersen, C. and Ziliak, J. *Health Affairs*. 2015 Nov;34(11):1830-9. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26526240/>

⁶ Food Research and Action Center, Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning1-.pdf>

⁷ Food Insecurity And Health Outcomes, Gundersen, C. and Ziliak, J. *Health Affairs*. 2015 Nov;34(11):1830-9. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26526240/>

⁸ Greater Chicago Food Depository analysis of National School Lunch Program and Summer Food Service Program total participation data, U.S. Department of Agriculture, FY2019. FY2019 data are used because of the ongoing disruption of pandemic-era policies on child nutrition program operation and utilization. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

⁹ Summer EBT 2024 awareness materials can be found at <https://bit.ly/SEBT2024Toolkit>.

¹⁰ Illinois Department of Human Services.

¹¹ Food Research and Action Center, Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning1-.pdf>

¹² Food Research and Action Center, Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning1-.pdf>

¹³ Benefits of School Breakfast - Food Research & Action Center (frac.org)

¹⁴ Benefits of School Breakfast - Food Research & Action Center (frac.org)

¹⁵ No Kid Hungry, How School Breakfast Benefits Kids, <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/school-breakfast/how-school-breakfast-benefits-kids>

¹⁶ The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2022-2023 School Year, Food Research and Action Center, March 2024 (Greater Chicago Food Depository analysis of report data). <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reach-Report2024-.pdf>

¹⁷ The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2022-2023 School Year, Food Research and Action Center, March 2024 (Table 1). <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reach-Report2024-.pdf>

¹⁸ About WIC-WIC's Mission. (2018, February). United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. Retrieved June 26, 2018, from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/about-wic-wics-mission>

¹⁹ National- and State-Level Estimates of WIC Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2022, U.S. Department of Agriculture, August 2024 (Table 3.5 and Table 3.6). <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/wic-eer-2022-report.pdf>

²⁰ Improving Access to WIC In Illinois: Findings From Local Level Research About Program Access and Implementation Barriers, Greater Chicago Food Depository and Illinois Department of Human Services, February 2024. <https://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/04/2024/improving-access-to-wic-in-illinois.pdf>

²¹ Improving Access to WIC In Illinois: Findings From Local Level Research About Program Access and Implementation Barriers, Greater Chicago Food Depository and Illinois Department of Human Services, February 2024. <https://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/04/2024/improving-access-to-wic-in-illinois.pdf>



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