

Governor Tate Reeves
550 High Street
Jackson, MS 39201

Representative John Read
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
400 High Street
House 201-C
Jackson, MS 39201

Senator Briggs Hopson
Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
400 High Street
Senate 214-B
Jackson, MS 39201

Hand delivered to House Appropriations A-E Chairpersons

February 27, 2024

RE: Urgent Call: Help Fight Food Insecurity Among Low-Income Children by Funding Summer Lunch Program

We, the undersigned organizations, call on Governor Reeves and the Mississippi State Legislature to urgently appropriate proper funding to bolster effective and well-established food programs for Summer 2024 and ensure timely preparations are made for the 2025 Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (Summer EBT) program.

Over the past several years, the summer Pandemic-EBT Program has proven to be a lifeline for countless families, ensuring that children in households experiencing food insecurity receive the nourishment they need even when schools are closed.

Congress has long recognized the importance of food security programs like these. Beginning in 2011, it invested in the Summer EBT pilot program, and in 2022, with overwhelming bipartisan support, passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which created a permanent Summer EBT program. Unfortunately, despite previous participation, Mississippi and 14 other states failed to submit their Notice of Intent to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to participate in this crucial program during Summer 2024. This leaves a void that lawmakers must urgently fill.

This failure to provide basic food security for children – the most vulnerable members of our communities – will have repercussions that cannot be ignored. For thousands of kids, summer break signifies the loss of access to school lunches, which often serve as their primary source of nutrition. Experiencing food insecurity can lead to a decrease in mental and physical health outcomes, standardized testing scores, and overall classroom readiness for the upcoming academic year. While states will still have access to non-congregate and group meal services through the USDA's Summer Nutrition Programs for Kids, the Summer EBT program is an important supplement that provides families with the autonomy and dignity to purchase meals that best meet their children's dietary and nutritional needs. The program was [shown to both reduce hunger and support healthier diets for](#)

[children](#), not only increasing the consumption of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables but also decreasing the consumption of sugary beverages.

More than 30 million children participate in the USDA's school breakfast and lunch program during the academic year. Only one in six children who eat free and reduced lunch participate in the summer meals program. In Mississippi alone, an estimated [175,000 children](#) under the age of 18 were living in poverty in 2022, with [40% of those being Black children](#). According to USDA estimates, [300,000 children](#) in Mississippi are eligible for Summer EBT. Participation would provide our state nearly [\\$38 million](#) in federal food assistance dollars to distribute to families with children experiencing food insecurity, ensuring that children have access to fresh, healthy foods and a hunger-free summer.

Furthermore, as you consider your office's budget priorities, keep in mind that economic analyses have consistently demonstrated that each dollar spent on food assistance generates local economic activity. According to the USDA, every dollar spent on food assistance generates local economic activity during an economic downturn. Based on the number of eligible children, Mississippi could have an [expected economic impact of \\$58,320,000 to \\$69,984,000](#) from Summer EBT benefits.

Given that the window for participation for 2024 has closed, we urge you to seriously explore additional means to ensure that children do not go hungry this summer. One possible course of action would be to provide supplemental funding for the Summer Food Service Program, including the Summer Nutrition Programs for Kids non-congregate and group meal services, through executive order or legislative appropriation.

We also urge you to take the necessary steps now to prepare for full participation in the Summer EBT program in 2025, including making necessary funding allocations to pay for administrative and implementation costs and working directly with the USDA to prepare to implement this program as soon as possible. Expanding the Summer EBT program and enabling summer meal programs to be more flexible is the simplest and most practical way to prevent child hunger when school is out, especially for children in rural communities.

Investing in our children's nutrition is an investment in their future. As our state debates solutions to improve academic readiness in our youth, the data clearly shows that school food programs contribute to the overall well-being and academic success of the next generation. Together, we can – and must – find creative and effective ways to support these essential programs. No child in our state should ever go without a meal during summer break.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and trust that you will make the health and welfare of our children a top priority.

Sincerely,

Sonya Williams Barnes, Mississippi Policy Director
SPLC Action Fund

Charles Taylor, Executive Director
MS State Conference NAACP

Danyelle Holmes, National Field Team Lead
Mississippi Poor People's Campaign

Rukia Lumumba, Executive Director
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Reginald Buckley, President
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Mississippi Center for Justice

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ACLU of Mississippi

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Jeffrey Hulum, III, CEO
Extend A Hand Help A Friend

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