Posted: 12/15/2014

To: School Food Authorities

Subject: SFS – 15-29 Foster Care Letter

The Departments of Agriculture, Education and Health and Human Services issued a tri-agency letter outlining the categorical eligibility of children and youth in foster care. Attached to the letter is a template that schools may use to notify parents that a foster child or youth in their care is eligible for free school meals.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Dear Chief State School Officers:

As the school year progresses, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA), Education, and Health and Human Services want to thank you again for the work you do to create healthy, nutritional environments in America's schools. One of our shared goals is ensuring *all* students have access to the nutrition they need to succeed in school and grow into healthy adults. To that end, we would like to remind you that the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 was enacted to further these shared goals.

One of the most vulnerable groups of students in our schools is children in foster care. Providing these students with a high-quality education and a consistent nutritional environment are goals we all share. We have the opportunity to improve services to students in foster care with two provisions of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 specifically designed to increase access to meals for students who experience low food security: (1) categorical eligibility for free school meals for students in foster care; and (2) the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a new universal meal program. We are asking for your help in leveraging these provisions by taking action in your State to better connect students in foster care with free school meals. Below you will find some suggested strategies you can use to support students in need, including students in foster care.

Maximize categorical eligibility for foster children

Students in foster care are categorically eligible for free school meals without submission of a free and reduced-price household application. This means that a student in foster care can receive free school meals based on third-party documentation of their foster status. Acceptable documentation includes information indicating the State retains legal custody of the child. That documentation can come from the court that placed the child or from a State or local foster agency that administers the foster care program. One of the most effective ways to certify more foster children for free school meals is for State educational agency personnel to work with their State Health and Human Services colleagues to develop mechanisms that enable schools to routinely and periodically receive information allowing them to directly certify foster children for free meals. This may include electronic systems that provide quick access to the status of a student as a foster child or periodic confirmation of a student's foster status.

We also encourage you to emphasize to your local educational agencies (LEAs) the importance of immediately transferring the free meal certification for foster children who move from one LEA to another during the school year in order to avoid any lapse in meal service. Because students in foster care tend to be more transient than other student populations, an LEA that accepts a previous school's free meal eligibility determination is able to continue providing food security to these children.

Support the CEP to increase access for all vulnerable populations

The CEP is an alternative to household applications that allows qualifying schools and LEAs to offer free meals to all students and increases access to school meals for vulnerable populations, including students in foster care. For schools and LEAs, benefits may include increased lunch and breakfast participation, revenue gains, and decreased administrative costs. For students, benefits include free breakfast and lunch and reduced stigma attached to receiving free meals. Access to free school meals for all students has the potential to reach many more eligible children who may otherwise fail to receive meal benefits. We ask that you consider whether some of your schools and districts may benefit from the CEP. Supporting community eligibility is a clear way to reach eligible students who are often harder to identify, such as foster children. For more information on the CEP, please visit http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/community-eligibility-provision.

Reach families who may not know they have eligible children

In addition to leveraging the two provisions described above, LEAs should work with the child welfare agency to ensure that foster parents know that their foster children are eligible for free school meals. The USDA has drafted a sample letter (see attachment) for schools to use in notifying foster parents about meal benefits for which their family may be eligible. The sample letter outlines a foster child's eligibility for school meals, how to apply for school meals if a child is not directly certified, and possible benefits for other children in the household. We ask that you share this letter with LEAs and schools to help reach those who may not otherwise receive free meals.

We all have a shared responsibility to see that all children have access to nutritious school meals that contribute to a healthful diet and academic preparedness. Supporting our most vulnerable students by maximizing categorical eligibility, supporting the CEP provision, and reaching out to foster families is essential to the success of our schools and our communities. We appreciate your continued commitment to creating a healthy school environment for all children, and encourage you to share this important information with your districts and schools.

Sincerely,

/s/	/s/	/s/
Thomas J. Vilsack Secretary Department of Agriculture	Sylvia Mathews Burwell Secretary Department of Health and Human Services	Arne Duncan Secretary Department of Education

Dear Foster Parents,

Welcome to [insert school year] at [insert school name]! We look forward to a healthy and successful school year with your children. With the start of a new school year, we wanted to remind you about school meals for your family.

Foster Children Eat for Free

A child in foster care, who is formally placed by a court or foster agency, can receive free school meals for the entire school year. If the school knows about your foster child, the child should already be getting free meals. If your foster child is not eating for free or you were not notified that he or she can receive free meals, you may apply for free school meals for your foster child at any time by contacting [insert name of school official here].

Meals for Other Children in Your House

Foster parents who apply for school meals may include both a foster child and their other children on the same application. Including a foster child on the same application as your other children will increase your house size, which may help your other children eat for free. But even if your other children cannot get free meals, your foster child can still get free school meals.

When a Foster Child Moves

If your family moves or your foster child moves to a new school, he or she can still get free meals. If you are in the same school district you do not have to do anything for your foster child to continue to get free meals. If you move to another school district, your foster child can still get free meals but you may need to reapply to continue or start school meal benefits. If your foster child stops getting free meals when you move, please let the school know as soon as possible.

If you have questions about the school meal program, please contact [insert name of official here] at [insert contact information here]. We look forward to working together to ensure your children receive nutritious meals this school year.

Sincerely,

[Signature of school official]