

# Iowa's food pantries hit record high numbers this summer

## Experts attribute the rise in need to the lack of a summer EBT program.

**Roxy Ekberg, Politics Editor**

During the first week of summer break in Lisbon, Iowa, school-aged kids popped into the Southeast Linn Community Center to ask if the center had food. Executive Director Nicole McAlexander said a scene like that had never happened before.

Lisbon is one of many rural communities that did not receive a summer meal site after Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds' administration did not submit a request to join a new federal program aimed at providing direct food aid to families during summer break. Rather, Reynolds' administration started an initiative to expand the state's summer lunch program.

SUN Bucks, also known as Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer or Summer EBT, provides eligible families \$120 per child per month on an EBT card — which functions like a credit card — to spend on groceries.

Reynolds submitted a waiver on Aug. 15 to opt out of the federal meal program and instead use the money to provide boxes of food to be picked up at participating sites around the state.

The program is paid for with federal dollars and would have cost the state the money it takes to administer the program — roughly \$2.2 million. The state could have received up to \$29.4 million in federal funds for the program.

Reynolds said in a December news release that an EBT card does not promote nutrition at a time when childhood obesity is on the rise. However, USDA research found that summer EBT programs reduce child hunger and support healthier diets in pilot programs.

This past summer was the first year EBT has been offered at the national level. Iowa families who typically receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year would have qualified for the program.

Instead of the SUN Bucks program, Reynolds distributed \$900,000 in competitive grants that allocated money to local groups to provide summer meals to kids across the state.

Awarded to school districts and other qualified organizations, the program launched additional summer meal sites utilizing two existing federal programs: the Summer Food Service Program and the Seamless Summer Option.



Isabella Tisdale

Pantry volunteer Becky Hays checks bread for mold before the opening of the North Liberty Food Pantry on Sept. 5, 2024. Food pantries around Iowa saw increased usage over the summer.

The governor's program created 61 new meal sites for a total of over 500 sites in Iowa, according to an August news release from the governor. However, McAlexander and other local food pantry leaders say this program is not enough to serve the state and that the lack of a summer EBT program has worsened Iowa's food insecurity.

McAlexander said the loss of Summer EBT or a summer meal site in her community created a gap for families who cannot drive to summer meal sites in Cedar Rapids or Iowa City. Those facing food insecurity in McAlexander's area have relied heavily on the center to meet their needs — a trend seen at community centers and food pantries across the state.

The Lisbon center's food distribution increased from 4,000 pounds in July 2023 to 5,232 pounds one year later. She said overall costs for stocking the pantry have doubled within the last two years.

Similarly, food pantries across the states are reporting an influx of need with rising numbers of community members both experiencing food insecurity and seeking assistance.

Nearly 111,000 children in Iowa — roughly 15 percent of the state's youth — were classified as food insecure in 2022, according to the most recent data from Feeding America.

Michelle Book, president and CEO of the Food Bank of Iowa, attributed the rise in need during summer months to the fact that 42 percent of all Iowa families qualify for free or reduced lunch, and therefore qualify for Summer EBT. These families no longer received 10 to 15 meals every week at school this summer.

"Those families, they're going to pantries or going to meal sites, and sometimes they're just doing without because they have not had the assistance this summer to help them fill that meal gap that their kids are missing from not being in school," Book said.

The Summer EBT program would have aided roughly 245,000 Iowa families in securing food for children over the summer, according to the Iowa Hunger Coalition. Reynolds projects her demonstration feeding project would aid nearly 300,000 Iowa families.

Local food pantries and community centers point to the lack of a Summer EBT program as the main influence for rising needs during the summer months. Increased prices, stagnating wages, and the expiration of pandemic benefits are other factors that play into rising food insecurity.

Record-breaking summer for pantries

In the nearly 50 years of operation for the Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry network, which manages 14 partner food pantry sites, this July was the busiest month on record.

That month, the network assisted 28,000 people, according to Blake Willadsen, Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry marketing and communications manager.

Willadsen recorded in July that about 36 percent — or roughly 10,000 people — who utilized a Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry Food Pantry were under 17 years old. Of that number, about 9 percent of them were visiting a food pantry for the first time.

Willadsen said about one in three people using the network right now have never been to a food pantry before this year, and this trend is not sustainable.

Several local food pantries observed similar record-breaking trends over the summer. Willadsen and other food pantry directors said their organizations have experienced a steady increase over the past two years following the reduction of food stamp benefits, the end of the Child Tax Credit, and now the absence of Summer EBT.

The North Liberty Community Pantry doubled the amount of food going off their shelves and into the hands of community members facing food insecurity in the past two years. The increase in need has been so drastic that the pantry relies on local restaurants and grocery stores to store food temporarily. The pantry is in the process of a \$4 million project to create a bigger space with more storage.

The North Liberty Community Pantry distributed a record high of over 64,000 pounds of food in July, and executive director Ryan Bobst said this is largely attributed to Summer EBT benefits no longer being available to local families.

Of the people the pantry serves, 41 percent are children; 99 percent of the people they serve would have received Summer EBT benefits, according to data provided by the pantry.

"Families continue to struggle with the price of food, and to not have access to those benefits and food assistance makes it that much harder," Bobst said. "They're relying on food pantries for a significantly higher amount of food than in the past."

The Coralville Community Food Pantry experienced a 24 percent increase in pounds of distributed food within the past year, jumping from 804,589 pounds to 997,790 pounds, according to Executive Director John Boller.

Boller said the pantry consistently stocks its inventory, but popular items such as fresh produce and milk are hard to keep in stock due to growing demand.

“There’s really no such thing as a slow day anymore,” Boller said. “At the beginning of the shift, our shelves and coolers are well stocked. Sometimes, within an hour or so, it’s looking a little more bare.”

The pantry is in its second summer providing a summer lunch program. In 2023, the pantry provided over 1,600 meals, and this year the number was closer to 2,500 meals. The pantry’s summer meal site served more than 130 children. Boller said this number is “just a drop in the bucket” when it comes to the amount of kids who need support in the summer.

“Summer lunch sites are really valuable, but they can’t stand in for the impact that Summer EBT usually has,” Boller said, referring to the impact of pandemic Summer EBT programs and other food insecurity programs.

Criticisms of summer meal sites

Reynolds’ meal site program has faced criticism from anti-hunger advocates for barriers to access and a lack of food choices for parents.

Reynolds touts the creation of 61 new meal sites across the state. Due to existing site closures, there was a net increase of 21 meal sites this summer — rising from a statewide total from 512 to 533.

The governor’s latest proposal offers a delivery option for families without transportation to summer meal sites.

Luke Elzinga, executive director of the Iowa Hunger Coalition and a lobbyist for the Des Moines Area Religious Council, pointed to a current USDA grant program offering \$100 million to help states bring down administrative costs for Summer EBT.

Each state is eligible for \$1.1 million, which, Elzinga said, to half administrative costs for Iowa at least in the first year.

Elzinga said the record-setting level of need at Iowa’s food pantries would not exist if Iowans had access to Summer EBT benefits.

“[Summer EBT] is meant to complement these summer meal sites,” Elzinga said. “It’s never been meant to replace them. It’s not an either/or. We should be doing everything, using every tool we have at our disposal to address childhood food insecurity during the summer.”

The Summer EBT program would have provided a pre-loaded EBT card for families to spend at the grocery store.

In contrast, Reynolds’ proposal would provide pre-packaged boxes of food, which limits food choice.

Elzinga said Iowans should be trusted to make food choices and meet their dietary needs based on allergies, cultural preferences, or religious guidelines.

“We’re talking about parents’ choice being such a huge theme these past few legislative sessions,” Elzinga said. “But when it comes to low-income parents, they can’t be trusted to choose what their kids eat, it seems out of line with that.”

Awaiting USDA approval of waiver

Gov. Reynolds submitted a waiver request on Aug. 15 to the USDA to opt out of the Summer EBT program, and instead use the federal funds to implement a summer feeding demonstration project.

The program would distribute food boxes to families at existing sites, such as nonprofits, food banks, and churches.

The demonstration project will be better suited to Iowa’s specific needs and capabilities, Reynolds said in an Aug. 15 news release.

By expanding eligibility to 200 percent of the federal poverty level, the demonstration project is estimated to serve 300,000 food-insecure children in the state. That is roughly 60,000 more than the number who would have received Summer EBT benefits.

Reynolds said in the news release that the plan for 2025 builds on the summer meal site program and promotes better health for Iowa children.

Reynolds cited childhood obesity in Iowa as a reason for opting out of Summer EBT and pursuing her summer meal site program.

The most recent State of Childhood Obesity Report ranked Iowa 18th-highest in the nation for childhood obesity.

“The complex issues of food insecurity and obesity cannot be solved with cash benefits that don’t actively promote health, nutrition-dense food, or reach all Iowa children in need,” Iowa Health and Human Services Director Kelly Garcia said in an Aug. 15 news release. “Our solutions to promote healthy behaviors and well-balanced, nutritious diets for children must be comprehensive and holistic.”

A USDA spokesperson issued a statement criticizing Reynolds’ proposal on Aug. 15.

The statement said the USDA’s Summer EBT program is backed by a decade of demonstration projects and rigorous evaluations showing that it works to reduce child hunger and support healthier diets.

“Through this waiver request, the governor is asserting that the state knows better than its own families do about what their needs are,” the spokesperson said. “The evidence-based Summer EBT program is successfully being run in more than three dozen states, territories, and tribes, helping 21 million children across the U.S. USDA stands ready to support additional states, including Iowa, in offering Summer EBT to even more kids.”

The USDA has not announced if they will accept Reynolds’ waiver, and no timeline on their decision is available at this time.

Last legislative session, Iowa Sen. Janice Weiner, D-Iowa City, filed legislation to require free school breakfast and lunch in the state and sponsored legislation that would provide \$5 million to the Iowa Food Bank Association.

The legislation did not advance.

Weiner said she fully plans to introduce free school breakfast and lunch legislation again in the upcoming legislative session. Weiner said there’s so much pressure on food pantries to provide for Iowa communities, and legislators should do everything they can to alleviate that.

“We pride ourselves on growing lots of food,” Weiner said. “We ought to be able to feed our people.”