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MEMORANDUM

TO: Local Education Agencies (LEAs) of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
FROM: Robert M. Leshin, Director
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)
Office for Food and Nutrition Programs (FNP)
DATE: June 30, 2023
RE: School Year (SY) 2023-2024 Massachusetts Meal Benefit Household Application Packet Now Available

Important
Program Action Required
SY 2023-2024 New Meal Benefit Application Packet
SY 2023-2024 Income Eligibility Guidelines

The Massachusetts prototype School Year (SY) 2023-2024 Free and Reduced Price School Meals Household Application Packet, including all meal benefit issuance and verification forms, is currently available. USDA has updated the application prototype and it is available for SY 23-24 in a form fillable PDF version. The SY 23-24 Income Eligibility Guidelines document is also available. Massachusetts' prototype documents are derived from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prototype materials found at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/applying-free-and-reduced-price-school-meals> Please reference [SP 16-2023: Revised Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals | Food and Nutrition Service \(usda.gov\)](#). Massachusetts prototype materials are found in the Document and Reference Library of the DESE Security Portal. These forms are **recommended for use** as they include all mandatory USDA and MA DESE information. Any Local Educational Agency that wishes to use a web-based application **must submit the Online Application Questionnaire** (please contact your DESE consultant). The questionnaire is intended to ensure that the scanned or web-based household application process meets the requirements. Any web-based application identified as not meeting the USDA requirements may result in fiscal action.

At this time, the FY 24 state budget is not yet finalized, and we await the securing of the continuation of meals at no cost for all students for the upcoming school year. The letters to households and public release templates available in the document and reference library of the security portal reflect messaging that meals are offered at no cost to all students. FNP is recommending districts not currently operating the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) district wide wait to issue these communications until the State budget is passed and the funding is secured. Letters specifically for CEP schools are also available in the security portal.

The meal benefit application packet available in the Document and Reference Library of the Security Portal includes the following:

- MA SY 23-24 and Reduced Price School Meals Household Application and Instructions

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

- The district modified Household Application must be submitted to DESE for review. Applications will be uploaded to DESE, as part of the NSLP Annual Renewal Application Packet in the Security Portal.
- USDA has updated the Spanish language version of the application prototype and instructions are also available in the document and reference library. USDA is planning to release additional languages and we will provide access to these forms when they become available.
- MA meal benefit issuance and verification documents, including prototype letters to households
 - The district modified letters to households must be submitted to DESE for review. The letters will be uploaded to DESE, as part of the NSLP Annual Renewal Application Packet in the Security Portal.
 - **New for SY 23-24**, notification letters for CEP schools are available and are the only notification letters that are required for **district wide** CEP. Districts with both traditional claiming and CEP schools will need to provide both sets of letters in the application packet under the Letters to Households component upload.
- SY 23-24 Income Eligibility Guidelines; **separate document intended for school use only.**
- MA DESE has created Public Media Release prototypes for individual LEAs use. *The prototypes are for traditional claiming schools, CEP districts, and districts with both traditional claiming schools and CEP schools.*

The Massachusetts Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals should be used whenever possible. Please be advised that use of outdated or unapproved documents may result in a fiscal disallowance.

The **Limited English Proficiency Taglines Cover Page** and **USDA I Speak...** documents should be included in the beginning of any communication sent to parents to assist in determining the language needs of a particular household. These documents are included in the Letters to Households and the Notification Letters. To accommodate a person with LEP use the translated USDA application package in their preferred language. Forty nine (49) different languages are available at www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/translated-applications. Additional instructions about diminishing participation barriers for Limited English Proficient (LEP) households are found in the Eligibility Manual for School Meals available in the Document and Reference Library and at https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/cn/SP36_CACFP15_SFSP11-2017a1.pdf.

The **Sharing Information with Other Programs** is included in the packet and may be used for specific programs that are not covered by the federal/state education program as authorized by law. The name of the program(s) must be identified on the release form and parental/guardian signature must be obtained prior to the release of any information. CEP Schools may include these forms when notifying households of direct certification matches if applicable. Parental consent is not required when sharing student eligibility information with other Child Nutrition Programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). *Please refer to the Eligibility Manual for School Meals for complete information.*

The **SY 23-24 Income Eligibility Guidelines** have been released and are located in DESE's Document and Reference Library of the security portal under NSLP – **Household Application**. **Do not include the Income Eligibility Guidelines document as part of the application package. It is for school use only!**

Please remember: All Public, Private, Charter Schools and RCCI's with DAY students MUST CONDUCT Direct Certification at least three times during the school year via the MA Virtual Gateway. Community Eligibility Provision Schools and Provision 2 non base year schools MUST CONDUCT Direct Certification at least once annually. More frequent direct certification efforts are permissible and encouraged for all school districts.

- **Direct Certification must be conducted prior to the start of school**
 - At or around the beginning of the school year (i.e., July 1);
 - Three months after the beginning of the school year; and
 - Six months after the beginning of the school year.
- Directly certified students **must receive** the Notice of Certification FREE or REDUCED PRICE letter informing the household of free or reduced price meal benefits. This requirement applies to CEP and Provision 2 schools as well.
- Subsequent direct certification efforts are required for children who were not initially directly certified and who are currently reduced price or paid.

- The status of any newly enrolled child must be checked for direct certification status at the time of enrollment. Students transferring from another LEA within the state may bring their eligibility determination for the current school year (2023-2024) with them.
- The verification process **can begin** on or before October 1 and **must be completed** by November 15, 2023. For more information on starting the verification process prior to October 1, please refer to [USDA policy memo SP 42-2017](#), review sample selection procedures in the Eligibility Manual and contact your DESE consultant.
- **Direct verification should be utilized** via the MA Virtual Gateway to see if any students selected for verification can be verified without having to use the paper verification process. **This process will save time!**
- A reminder that applications cannot be distributed or made available, **either in an online format or electronically**, at the end of the school year for the next year. Also, the Local Educational Agency must not accept or process applications before the beginning of the federally defined school year (July 1 - June 30).

If you have any questions regarding the USDA School Nutrition Programs, please contact:

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Ebonique Faria	Ebonique.P.Faria@mass.gov	781-338-6461
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Available in the Document and Reference Library are Massachusetts prototype forms

Required information that must be provided to households:

- Notice of Direct Certification approval for **free and reduced price** meals to households with students that are matched via the Virtual Gateway
- Letter to Households/Frequently Asked Questions (CEP and Provision 2 non base year schools are exempt)
- How to Apply for Free and Reduced Price School Meals (CEP and Provision 2 non base year schools are exempt)
- Massachusetts Free and Reduced Price School Meals Family Application–SY 2023-2024 (CEP and Provision 2 non base year schools are exempt)
- Notice to Households of Approval/Denial of Benefits (CEP and Provision 2 non base year schools are exempt)

Required Verification documents and information for households selected for verification of eligibility information materials (CEP and Provision 2 non base year schools are exempt):

- Notification of Selection for Verification of Eligibility - *if household is not directly verified via the Virtual Gateway*
- Letter of Verification Results – *Provide to ALL households selected for verification (direct verification or paper method)*

Optional application-related materials that **should** be provided to households. CEP and Provision 2 non base year schools can attach these materials to the notice of direct certification:

- Sharing Information with Medicaid/CHIP
- Sharing Information with Other Programs: *In most instances, LEAs may not share eligibility information without consent. DESE highly recommends including this document if the district provides additional benefits to eligible students as part of the meal benefit package.*
- USDA’s “**I SPEAK Statements**” and **Limited English Proficiency Taglines Cover Page** with local phone numbers inserted where a parent who is not proficient in English and/or is hearing impaired could call to get access to program information. This should be available at the school or district level where a parent can go to get any vital information about their child’s education experience. The “I SPEAK” statements can assist in determining the language needs of households.
- SNAP and WIC Flyers

- Affordable Connectivity Program Flyer available as a separate download in the Document and Reference Library. See [News Article - Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) for details and eligibility requirements.

The pages are designed to be printed on 8½” by 11” paper. Some pages may be printed front and back. You will need to identify the benefits that are offered in your school, such as afterschool snacks. **The [bold, bracketed fields] indicate where you need to insert school district specific information.** For example, you must include your district’s no-charge telephone number for verification assistance on the verification materials. This prototype application package includes information regarding the exclusion of housing allowance for those in the Military Housing Privatization Initiative. If this is not pertinent to your school district, please modify as appropriate. **A hearing procedure guidelines document is also included for the district to use to develop their district specific hearing procedures.**

All households must be notified of their eligibility status. Households with children who are denied benefits must be given written notification of the denial. The notification must advise the household of the reason for the denial of benefits, the right to appeal, instruction on how to appeal, and a statement that the family may re-apply for free and reduced price meal benefits at any time during the school year. Households with children who are approved for free or reduced price benefits with an application may be notified in writing or orally.

If you have questions, contact:

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