

ELIGIBILITY GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL MEALS

NOTE: Further information regarding the determination of eligibility for free and reduced priced meals can be found in the USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals located in SNEARS.

I. APPLICATION CATEGORIES

A. Direct Certification (DC)

1. Children who are directly certified are automatically approved for free meals or free milk based on information received from the NJ SNAP (Food Stamp), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) or Foster (Department of Children & Families) offices, without further application. Access to DC is through SNEARS. **The file upload method must be used for the four mandated file uploads.**

The user will agree to a statement of confidentiality and select the appropriate municipality codes. The School Food Authority (SFA) will download their current enrollment with access to meals into the required Excel format. This data will be uploaded into SNEARS and merged with the NJ SNAP, TANF and Foster data. A list of the directly certified students will be generated. The SFA will certify the matched names with their enrolled students with access to meals.

An individual student match should only be used to check the status for new students during the school year or to check the eligibility of the student on a case by case basis. It cannot be used in lieu of the file upload.

2. SFAs must conduct DC a minimum of four times as follows:

1st Run: Between July 15 but not later than August 30

2nd Run: Between September 1 and September 30

3rd Run: Between October 1 and October 30

4th Run: Between March 1 and March 30

The DC Notification Letter(s) must be sent to all DC households.

3. Eligibility for free meals is extended to all children in a household if one member has been directly certified as SNAP or TANF. The extension **does not** apply for Foster. The DC process has been refined to include a household match to help SFAs identify other children in the household who are eligible for meal benefits. The enrollment records provided by the school and parents completing/returning the *Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* can also serve as useful tools to “capture” siblings.
4. If Foster children receive SNAP or TANF benefits, they will be determined as SNAP or TANF not FOSTER during the DC process. Remember SNAP always takes precedence. The status of the child on the Master Eligibility List (MEL) must match the DC list.
5. Paper applications received from a household with children identified as DC could be discarded or kept in a separate file. DC always takes precedence over a paper application.

6. The MEL should be updated to reflect changes after each DC match.
7. Children who are directly certified are not subject to verification.

B. Categorical Applications

1. NJ SNAP/TANF Applications

Applications for children receiving NJ SNAP or TANF benefits **MUST CONTAIN:**

Step 1 – The name of each child in the household as well as the name of the school the child attends. Check (✓) whether or not the child(ren) attends the school district.

Step 2 - NJ SNAP or TANF case number for one household member who is receiving benefits.

The case number is to be 10 characters that uniquely identifies a family receiving SNAP or TANF benefits. In New Jersey, the case number begins with "C", "S", or "G" followed by six numeric characters and ending with a three digit county code. For example, a three digit county would begin with 001 for Atlantic County and 021 for Warren. Parents and guardians often do not include the county code, making it feasible that a six digit numeric code would still be valid. The alpha code at the beginning can be optional. Please contact the Department of Human Services for more information on the format of the case number.

A Medicaid or WIC number is not acceptable.

Step 4 - A signature of an adult member in the signature box. A printed name is an acceptable signature.

The last four digits of the social security number **is not required** when NJ SNAP or TANF case numbers are given. Children's racial & ethnic identities are optional.

2. Other Source Categorically Eligible Applications (Homeless, Migrant, Runaway and Foster Child)

Applications for homeless, migrant, runaway and foster children **MUST CONTAIN:**

Step 1 – The name of each child in the household as well as the name of the school the child attends. Check (✓) whether or not the child(ren) attends the school district. Check (✓) the appropriate box for foster child or migrant, homeless, or runaway.

Eligibility must be documented as follows:

Homeless Children: The SFA Homeless Liaison or the director of the homeless shelter where the child is residing **must** validate free meal eligibility. Documentation to validate free meal eligibility must consist of the name of the child(ren), effective date, signature of the SFA liaison or director of homeless shelter and date signed. The Documentation for Homeless and Runaway Students ([Form #146A](#)) can serve as documentation or the director of the homeless shelter can provide a letter.

Runaway Children: The SFA liaison must document that the runaway child is receiving assistance under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RYHA). Documentation of the runaway's RYHA participation must consist of the name of the child(ren), effective date, signature of the SFA's homeless liaison and date signed. The Documentation for Homeless and Runaway Students ([Form #146A](#)) can also serve as documentation. For more information about RHYA refer to the website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/programs/runaway-homeless-youth>.

Migrant Children: The Migrant Education Program (MEP) Coordinator **must** validate free meal eligibility. Documentation must consist of the name of the child(ren), effective date, the signature of the MEP Coordinator or the state MEP director and the date signed. In conjunction with this documentation, SFAs can use Documentation for Migrant Education Program ([Form #146B](#)).

Foster Children: A foster child's eligibility can be determined four ways:

1. Through the DC process.
2. A letter from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) (DCF 5-49) documenting that the child is a foster child; an application for free meals is not required. The letter is considered documentation that the foster child is categorically eligible for free meals.
3. An application submitted *ONLY* for a foster child(ren). The application **MUST CONTAIN:**

Step 1 - The name of each foster child enrolled in the district as well as the name of the school the foster child(ren) attends. Check (✓) the box indicating that the child(ren) attends the school district.

Step 4 - A signature of an adult member in the household in the signature box. A printed name is an acceptable signature.

Optional - The ethnicity and race of the child(ren).

4. If an application is submitted for a household that consists of the children and foster children within the same household, the application **MUST CONTAIN:**

Step 1 - The name of each child in the household as well as the name of the school the child(ren) attends. Check (✓) whether or not the student attends the school district. Check (✓) the appropriate box for each foster child.

Step 3A - The *total* income earned by *all children*. If the children do not earn any income, enter "0" or leave this space blank.

Step 3B - The name of all adult members in the household. The total income for each source (rounded to whole dollar amount) with the correct frequency must be recorded. If there

is no income to record, enter "0" or leave this space blank. The total number of household members must be recorded in the appropriate box. The last four digits of the primary wage earner or another adult member of the household social security number (SSN) is required. If no adult member has a SSN, then check (✓) the "no SSN" box.

Step 4 - A signature of an adult member in the signature box. A printed name is an acceptable signature.

Homeless, migrant, runaway and all foster children are identified on the MEL as categorically free and "excluded from verification". The eligibility category (free, reduced or denied) for the other students on the foster/household application must be based on the total household size (including the foster child) and income information stated on the application. These applicants must be listed on the MEL under the appropriate category (free, reduced or denied).

C. **Income Applications**

Income applications **MUST CONTAIN:**

Step 1 - The name of each child enrolled in the district as well as the name of the school the child(ren) attends. Check (✓) the box indicating that the child(ren) attends the school district.

Step 3A - The *total* income earned by *all children*. If the children do not earn any income, enter "0" or leave this space blank.

Step 3B - The name of all adult members in the household. The total income for each source (rounded to whole dollar amount) with the correct frequency must be recorded. If there is no income to record, enter "0" or leave this space blank. The total number of household members must be recorded in the appropriate box. The last four digits of the primary wage earner or another adult member of the household social security number (SSN) is required. If no adult member has a SSN, then check (✓) the no SSN box.

Step 4 - A signature of an adult member in the signature box. A printed name is an acceptable signature.

Optional - The ethnicity and race of the child(ren).

These applicants must be listed on the MEL under the appropriate category (free, reduced priced or denied).

II. **ELIGIBILITY DETERMINATION FACTS**

- A. The previous school year benefits can be carried over up to 30 **operating** days (beginning with the first day of school) into the current school year or until a new eligibility determination is made. The new eligibility determination supersedes the carryover eligibility.

- B.** Before the applications are processed and approved for the current school year, the SFA can only claim and be reimbursed for free and reduced price meals or free milk served to:
- i. Children who were approved for free/reduced priced benefits from the previous year.
 - ii. New children whose siblings were approved for free/reduced benefits from the previous year.
 - iii. Previously approved children who transfer from one school to another within the same district

C. An eligibility determination must be made and implemented within 10 **working** days of the receipt of the application. Whenever possible, applications should be processed immediately, particularly for children who do not have approved applications on file from the previous year.

D. Review the application to determine if all required information is included.

E. If an application is incomplete and/or contains inconsistent information, and/or is unclear, the application must be denied unless the information is obtained or clarified. School officials may obtain or clarify the information prior to denial by:

Contacting the household by phone. **Document** on the application all contacts with households. (Include date, information received and initials)

- OR -

Contacting the household in writing ([Form #64](#) or [Form #64S](#))

F. If the application is complete, determine the eligibility based on the current fiscal income eligibility guidelines ([Form #127](#) or [Form #178](#)):

- i. If one income is recorded or all income recorded has the same frequency (i.e. all biweekly), total the incomes and household members and compare to the corresponding frequency on the income eligibility guidelines.
- ii. If two or more income frequencies are recorded, the income must be annualized by the determining official using the following formulas:

Weekly x 52

Every 2 weeks x 26

Twice a month x 24

Monthly x 12

Calculate the total income of the household members and compare it to the annual income eligibility guidelines.

G. Identify those applications that are error prone by writing EP on the application. Error prone is defined as:

- Weekly: \$0-\$25 below the free/reduced price income eligibility limit.
- Every two weeks: \$0-\$50 below the free/reduced price income eligibility limit.
- Twice a month: \$0-\$50 below the free/reduced price income eligibility limit.
- Monthly: \$0-\$100 below the free/reduced price income eligibility limit.
- Annually: \$0-\$1200 below the free/reduced price income eligibility limit.

- H. Complete *for school use only* box on the second bottom page of the application. This section provides the total income by frequency, household size, the signature of determining official (confirming and verifying official if applicable), the determination date and eligibility (F=free, R=reduced, and D=denied).
- I. Eligibility determinations are valid for the entire school year unless the household ***chooses to reapply to improve their benefits.***
- J. If all children listed in Step 1 of the application withdraw, record date withdrawn at the top of the application and on the MEL. If only one student in Step 1 withdraws, record the date withdrawn next to that name of the student and on the MEL.
- K. Sharing Information with Other Programs ([Form #124](#) or [Form#124S](#)) must be completed by the household in order to share eligibility information with other programs or for any services. This includes, but is not limited to: providing free books, dental services, test fees, athletic fees, field trip fees, prom tickets, etc. Each specific reason must be listed separately on the form.

III. **MAINTAINING THE APPLICATION AT THE CENTRAL LEVEL**

- A. After determination of eligibility:
 1. Assign number to each application
 2. Send all original applications to a central location
 3. Eliminate duplicate applications
 4. Generate district and school Master Eligibility List (MEL)
 5. Generate eligibility status letter
- B. File applications numerically

IV. **DEVELOPING THE MASTER ELIGIBILITY LIST (MEL)**

- A. MEL is required for the district and for each school. The MEL must be generated and updated from a central location and should contain:
 1. Name of School
 2. Application Number (or indication that the student is DC)
 3. Date of Approval
 4. Name of Student (First and Last)
 5. Eligibility Status
 If applicable:
 6. Error Prone Status
 7. Verification Selection
 8. Date of Withdrawal from District/School

V. **ELIGIBILITY DETERMINATIONS BY ELECTRONIC SYSTEMS**

SFAs that use an online application, a scanned application format, or an electronic application that approves the *Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* must get approval from the NJDA School Nutrition Programs office on an **annual** basis to use the software program/form prior to activating it on the district's web site.

A. Computer Determination:

1. Determining official may sign or initial and date on a sheet of paper attached to a batch of applications. (Each application does not have to be individually signed).
2. The computer system must be able to capture the original date of approval.
3. The computer system must be able to update the status of applications to account for transfers, withdrawals, terminations, verification results and other changes.

B. Updating Applications:

1. The change in status of an application may be maintained in a computer instead of being noted on the application. The ability to change the meal eligibility in the database must be restricted to specified personnel.
2. Changes must be readily retrievable by school.
3. Changes must be indicated on the MEL and in the meal counting system at the school level.

VI. MAINTENANCE OF THE POINT OF SALE DATABASE TO SERVE AS A MEL

- A.** Historical information, as reflected in the database, must be retrievable on a school-by-school basis. Historical data includes the eligibility status of the child(ren), date of approval, and if applicable, transfer date, verification results, any other eligibility changes, and the effective dates.
- B.** If historical data can be retrieved, the POS (Point of Sale) database can serve as the MEL.
- C.** If historical data cannot be retrieved, the following system must be implemented.
- Print a copy of the database, from the point of sale terminal, on the first or last day of each month. Any changes in meal eligibility status must be manually documented on this list during the month.
 - The database list with the manual changes should be filed with the edit check worksheet each month.
- D.** All enrolled students must be in the POS database with their respective eligibility.

VII. PROCEDURE FOR UPDATING A HOUSEHOLD'S ELIGIBILITY STATUS

A. New Application of Household:

1. Attach the new application to the old application (most current on top).
2. Determine the application and assign the same application number.
3. Complete *for school use only* box on the second page of the application located on the bottom.
4. Update MEL with change(s).
5. Generate a Letter to Notify Household of Eligibility status ([Form #70](#) or [Form #70S](#)).
6. Notify all appropriate personnel of eligibility changes.

7. Update all meal count rosters, meal tickets or POS at school level.

B. Eligibility Changes (as a result of an Administrative Review (AR) Verification or Internal Audit)

1. Note effective date and change(s) on the application
2. Update *for school use only* box the second page of the application located on the bottom.
3. Update MEL with changes.
4. Generate letter to notify household of new eligibility status:
 - a. Letter of Audit Results ([Form # 255](#) or [Form #255S](#)) for AR or internal audit changes.
 - b. We Have Checked Your Application ([Form #244](#) or [Form #244S](#)) for verification changes.
5. Notify all appropriate personnel of eligibility changes.
6. Update all meal count rosters, meal tickets or POS at school level.

VIII. CIVIL RIGHTS PROCEDURES

- A.** USDA Nondiscrimination Statement: All FNS nutrition assistance programs, State or local agencies, and their subrecipients, must post the following Nondiscrimination Statement:

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, age, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g. Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.), should contact the Agency (State or local) where they applied for benefits. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech disabilities may contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program complaint of discrimination, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, (AD-3027) found online at: http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html, and at any USDA office, or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by:

(1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
1400 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, D.C. 20250-9410;

(2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or

(3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

B. Sponsors are Required to:

1. Collect ethnic and racial data of enrollment for **each** school and free, reduced priced and denied applicants ([Form #86](#)). The collection of the data is through observation, personal knowledge, or voluntary self-identification. Documentation must be maintained for three years.
2. Include the non-discrimination statements (written above) on all publications, including websites.
3. Display “. . . And Justice for All” poster prominently in the all feeding service areas.
4. Immediately forward any complaints of discrimination in writing to FNS or Division of Food and Nutrition. Complaints will be investigated by interviews with all parties, witnesses and collaborative contacts.
5. Protect the rights and privileges of children with disabilities, and to ensure they have equal access to benefits when compared to children without disabilities.
6. Take the reasonable steps to ensure limited English proficient households to have access to the program.