

Eligibility Tool Kit

Introduction

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) Child Nutrition Program (CNP) has developed this Eligibility Toolkit to support School Food Authorities (SFAs) in making eligibility determinations and to provide clear and easy access to available resources.

Important: Determining student eligibility is a critical process in administering federal nutrition programs. Please take time to familiarize yourself with the resources provided and reach out to your [assigned Child Nutrition Specialist](#) with questions.

Community Eligibility Provision

SFAs that operate the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for some sites, but not district-wide, must follow the eligibility guidelines for all sites not operating under CEP. The information in this document does **not** apply to SFAs operating district-wide CEP.

The following topics will be covered in this toolkit:

[Eligibility Official and Hearing Official](#)

[Household Applications for Federal Free and Reduced Price Meals](#)

[Household Application for Oregon Expanded Income Guidelines](#)

[Direct Certification](#)

[Verification](#)

[Confidentiality and Disclosure of Free and Reduced Information](#)

Eligibility Official and Hearing Official

Overview

SFAs must identify the individual serving as the Eligibility Official and the individual serving as the Hearing Official. The same person may **not** fill both roles.

- **Eligibility Official:** This role is also referred to as the “Determining Official” in the [USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#). This is the person the SFA designates as the official responsible for determining children’s eligibility for free and reduced-price meals.
- **Hearing Official:** SFAs must have an appeal process to address households wishing to appeal the denial of their benefits. The hearing official must conduct and decide on the appeal. This must be a different person than the one who made the original eligibility determination.

Household Applications for Free and Reduced-Price Meals

The information below applies to all SFAs operating some or all sites with standard meal counting and claiming that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Afterschool Snack Service, School Breakfast Program (SBP), and/or Special Milk Program, including private schools in Oregon.

Overview

All SFAs participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and/or School Breakfast Program (SBP) under standard meal counting and claiming must make free and reduced-price meals available to eligible students. SFAs must make applications available to all students.

Requirements

- ✓ Around the start of the school year, the public must be notified that free and reduced-price meals and/or free milk are available. SFAs may use the current school year Public Release from ODE to meet this requirement.
- ✓ SFAs must distribute [parent notification letters](#) and [meal applications with instructions](#) to parents of all children on or near the beginning of the school year.
- ✓ Any communication with households concerning eligibility determinations must be in a language that can be understood by the household. Language translations of the Prototype Application for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals and application instructions are available on ODE's [Meal Access and Reimbursement webpage](#) under the "Certification and Benefit Issuance" heading and "Federal Guidelines" subheading. Please reach out to your [assigned Child Nutrition Specialist](#) if you are in need of translated applications in additional languages.
- ✓ SFAs must have a system in place to identify language needs of households.

Processing Applications: Resources and Tips

- Use the most current version of the [USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#) as a guiding document.
- The [ODE CNP Online Application for Free and Reduced Meals](#) is available for all SFAs to use at no charge. Sponsors may refer to ODE's [Download Instructions](#). Postcards that can be sent to households promoting the Online Free and Reduced-Price Application are available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).
- SFAs must process applications within ten operating days of receipt.
- It is a best practice to date stamp applications when received to demonstrate processing time.
- Effective date of eligibility can be the date the application was submitted or the date the application was approved. If using the date of submission date for the effective eligibility date the LEA must have an approved "Eligibility Effective Date Notification" form (available from the packet tab in CNPweb) on file
- All programs must have a method to document and track dates.
- Eligibility is carried over from the previous school year for thirty operating days or until a new eligibility determination is made, whichever is earlier.
- All applications must be retained for three years plus the current school year.

Approving Applications

- Applications are approved by Categorical Eligibility or Income Eligibility:
 - **Categorical Eligibility**
 - A household member providing an Assistance Program case number (SNAP / TANF / FDPIR) determines eligibility.
 - Households must name the source of the case number.
 - If the supplied case number is not consistent with Oregon assistance program numbers, as listed in the following bullets, the SFA should contact the household or assistance program agency to confirm eligibility.
 - Valid case number formats include:
 1. Social security numbers containing nine numeric characters.
 2. SNAP:
 - i. 8-character format: 2 letters, 3 numbers, 1 letter, 1 number, 1 letter
 - ii. 9-character format: The letter F followed by 8 numeric characters
 - iii. 9-character format: Starts with the number 4 followed by 8 numeric characters
 3. TANF: A mix of 6 alpha numeric characters, example: AB1234, or ABC123
 - Categorical Eligibility extends to all household members for SNAP/ TANF/FDPIR. Note: Eligibility does **not** extend to other household members for foster children / migrant/ homeless / Head Start.
 - For SNAP notification letters and SNAP case numbers provided on an application, the SFA should compare the application or letter with the Direct Certification list. If found on the Direct Certification list, the application is disregarded and the household is directly certified.
 - **Income Eligibility**

Income Application must include:

 - Names of ALL household members
 - Last four digits of the Social Security Number of the adult who signs the application or indication of no Social Security Number
 - Current amount of income for each household member
 - When no income is provided, the application is still considered complete with zero income.
 - Convert to annual income when there is more than one pay frequency (Weekly x 52; every two weeks x 26; twice a month x 24; monthly x 12). See Income Conversions on page 61 of the [USDA Eligibility Manual](#)
 - Use most current [Federal Income Guidelines](#)
 - [ODE Processing Federal Income Applications Guidelines](#)

Household Notification

- Households must be notified of their eligibility status. The [USDA Prototype Family Notification Letters Template](#) is available for SFAs to use.
- The “Hearing Official” is the individual responsible for reviewing and deciding on an appeal for the benefit determination.
- The hearing official must be a different person than the Determining Official.
- Household notification letters should include the name and contact information of the Hearing Official.
- Households approved for free or reduced-price meals, including directly certified students, may be notified in writing or verbally.
- Households denied benefits must be provided **written** notification, including:
 - Reason for denial of benefits
 - Right to appeal / instructions on how to appeal.
 - Statement that the family may re-apply anytime during the school year.

Household Applications for Oregon Expanded Income Guidelines

Overview

The Oregon Expanded Income Guidelines (EIG) is an Oregon-funded school meal provision program. The program provides a supplemental reimbursement to the federal paid reimbursement amount for meals provided at no charge to students who qualify under Oregon EIG guidelines, but who do not qualify for free or reduced meals under federal income guidelines. Oregon EIG is mandatory for Oregon public schools that are not participating in CEP.

- SFAs may use the [Oregon Household Application for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals](#) or [online Household Application for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals](#) provided by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) or eligibility software providers.
- In addition to meeting the federal notification requirements, SFAs may distribute the [Oregon EIG Parent FAQ about Free and Reduced Price Meals](#) with applications.
- SFAs will first determine student eligibility for free, reduced price, or paid categories using the [Federal Income Guidelines](#) and issue the Federal Notice to Households of Approval/Denial of Benefits. See [Topic: Processing Applications for Federal Free and Reduced Price Meals](#) and [Topic: Household Notification](#).
- SFAs will then refer to the [Oregon Expanded Income Guidelines](#) to determine if applications in the federal paid/denied category are eligible for Oregon EIG.
- The [Application Processing Guidance for Oregon Expanded Income Guidelines](#) is a helpful resource to aid Eligibility Officials in making eligibility determinations of Oregon EIG benefits.
- SFAs must issue the [EIG approval letter](#) if applicable, in addition to the Federal Notice of Denial of Benefits. A template for the Federal Notice of Denial of Benefits can be found in [USDA’s Prototype Household Letters for State and Local Agencies](#) document.
- The Oregon EIG section of the [ODE SNP Meal Access and Reimbursement webpage](#) has language translations of the Oregon EIG Application and Oregon EIG Household Approval letters available in Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

Direct Certification

Overview

Direct certification is the process SFAs use to certify categorically eligible children for free meals without further application.

Requirements

- ✓ SFAs must directly certify children who are members of households receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- ✓ Direct certification must be performed three times per year at the beginning of the school year, three months after initial, and six months after initial. This requirement applies to schools operating standard counting and claiming for **any** meals, or schools operating Provision 2 for all meals in base years.
- ✓ Per [7 CFR 245.6\(b\)\(1\)\(v\)](#), Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools and schools participating in Provision 2 serving breakfast and lunch in non-base years are required to conduct direct certification at least once per school year.
- ✓ Best practice is to conduct direct certification frequently, at a minimum of monthly during the school year.

Direct Certification Data System

ODE CNP has an electronic data-match system to produce a direct certification list. SFAs can use this list to “directly certify” students without further application. The Direct Certification file combines Secure Student Identifier (SSID) records that school districts submit to ODE with SNAP participation and foster care records from the Oregon Department of Human Services. These records are used to certify students for free meals at participating schools.

Schools and school districts may retrieve these records by using the weekly [download](#), or the [Membership List Upload](#).

Process

- Perform direct certification at required intervals or more frequently.
- Extend free meal eligibility to all students in a household where any household member received assistance program benefits.
- Notify households of their eligibility:
 - Notification may be in writing or verbal.
 - Email notification is allowed if the SFA has an email address for a parent or guardian listed on the direct certification download.
 - Notification should only be sent to the guardian/parent name and address listed on the direct cert download.
 - Template notification letters are linked below.
 - [USDA’s Prototype Household Letters](#) include a Notice of Direct Certification
 - [Medicaid Direct Certification for Reduced-Price Meals](#)
 - [District-wide CEP Direct Certification Letter](#)
 - [Partial District CEP Direct Certification Letter](#)

Direct Certification System Access

- **Public schools:** Contact your [System Administrator](#) to gain access to the direct certification system.
- **Private schools:** Email ode.schoolnutrition@ode.oregon.gov to request access.

Direct Certification using Medicaid Data Demonstration Project

ODE Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) is participating in a demonstration project in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Oregon Health Authority (OHA) to directly certify students receiving Medicaid benefits for school meal benefits. Income information from Medicaid eligibility will be used to identify households that meet the income threshold for free or reduced-price meal benefits.

Direct Cert-Medicaid (DC-M) data is available in the Direct Certification System and uses a similar process as direct certification for SNAP and Foster child certification.

Verification

Overview

Verification is the annual, mandatory process that confirms the eligibility of a sample of completed household meal eligibility applications in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Each SFA must select and verify a sample of applications approved for free and reduced-price meal benefits. The required sample size of applications to be verified is based on the number of approved applications on file as of October 1.

Requirements

- ✓ SFAs must annually verify eligibility of children from a sample of household applications submitted prior to October 1 that were approved for free and reduced-price meal benefits.
- ✓ SFAs must complete the annual verification process by November 15.

Annually submit the Verification Summary Report to ODE CNP by February 1.

Process

Step 1.

The first step in the verification process is establishing the sample pool. The sample pool uses the total number of approved applications on file as of October 1 of the current school year.

Step 2

- Once the total number of subject applications (Sample Pool) has been determined, you must then determine your sample size based on the method of verification. The sample size may **not** exceed the required number of applications according to the methods below.

There are three methods:

- Standard (3% error prone method)
- Alternate one
- Alternate two

ODE CNP will notify SFAs of which method must be used on an annual basis.

Step 3.

There are two procedures the SFA must complete prior to contacting the household to obtain documentation of eligibility: The required confirmation reviews and the optional replacement of certain applications.

- Confirmation Review:
 - Prior to any other verification activity, a determining official must review each approved application selected for verification to ensure the initial determination was accurate.
 - If have an approved “Verification Review of Application Exception” on file, the confirmation review may be waived if a “Second Review” during initial confirmation process was completed or certifications were made using an accurate technology-based system.
- Optional Replacement of Selected Applications:
 - When the need arises, an SFA may replace, on a case-by-case basis, up to five percent of the applications selected for verification.

Step 4

Begin verification of applications by checking for **direct verification**. Note: Direct *verification* is different from direct *certification*.

- Direct verification involves using records from public agencies to verify household income or household participation in an eligible program.
- Direct verification can be done by accessing a list of Medicaid recipients that ODE CNP posts annually during the verification time period. This data is found on the [ODE CNP Direct Certification webpage](#) and can be used to verify income or program participation.
- If direct verification is completed and income is verified, the household does **not** need to be contacted.

Step 5

When a household is selected for verification, the SFA must inform the household, in writing, of its selection and must provide a list of the documents or other forms of evidence the household must submit to the SFA. The ODE [Notice of Verification Selection Letter](#) can be used. This letter is available in several different languages on the ODE [Verification Website](#).

Step 6

The SFA must make at least one attempt to contact the household when the household does not adequately respond to the request for verification.

Step 7

When a household submits the required documents, the SFA must review the submitted documents to ensure they adequately address the verification request.

Step 8

SFAs must conclude the verification process with the selected households and notify them of the outcome by **November 15** of each year. The ODE [Notice of Adverse Action: Changing Meal Benefits](#) and the [Notice of Adverse Action: Not Responding to Verification](#) can be used. These letters are available in several different languages on the ODE Verification Website.

Step 9

The SFA has completed the entire process once the verification summary report, FNS-742, has been submitted to the state agency. This report is due annually by February 1 via CNPweb on the Claims tab. While ODE does not accept paper or electronic copies of the [FNS-742 Form](#), the paper form and instructions can be a helpful tool for SFAs in preparing the FNS-742 report submission.

[Verification At a Glance](#) provides a summary of the Verification process and requirements.

Verification for Cause

Apart from the required verification of a specified number of approved applications, SFAs are required to verify any questionable applications. Eligibility officials are encouraged to contact the household to clarify any information that is unclear or questionable before certifying the application and proceeding with verification for cause.

Confidentiality and Disclosure of Free and Reduced Eligibility

Overview

The information provided by families on the confidential free and reduced-price application can be used only for determining eligibility for meal or milk benefits and verification of eligibility. SFAs must take measures to ensure a student's eligibility status is not disclosed.

Key Points

- Disclosure means revealing or using individual children's program eligibility information obtained through the eligibility process for a purpose other than the purpose for which the information was obtained.
- The National School Lunch Act (NSLA) establishes the disclosure limits for the Child Nutrition Programs. School Food Authorities may disclose, in limited situations, children's free and reduced-price meal eligibility information to programs, activities, and individuals, as specifically authorized under the NSLA.
- The SFA must seek written consent from the parent or guardian to use the information provided on the application for non-Program purposes or for purposes specifically mentioned in the Eligibility for School Meals manual. Consent must be obtained each school year, and consent forms cannot be extended from one school year to the next.
- Disclosure of individual Free and Reduced information to any program should have a signed [USDA Confidentiality Disclosure Agreement](#) in place. Detailed information on when a signed USDA Confidentiality Disclosure Agreement must be place can be found on page 89 of USDA's [Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#).

[The Participant Confidentiality Disclosure Quick Reference](#) guides SFAs through the disclosure process.

Overt Identification

Overt identification is any action that may result in a child being recognized as potentially eligible or certified for free or reduced-price school meals. School Food Authorities must avoid any policy or practice leading to the overt identification of children receiving free or reduced-price meal benefits.

School Food Authorities must ensure that a child's eligibility status is not disclosed at any point in the process of providing free and reduced-price meals, including:

- Notification of the availability of free and reduced-price benefits
- Certification and notification of eligibility
- Provision of meals in the cafeteria or at the point of service

Helpful Resources:

- ✓ [Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#)
- ✓ [ODE Eligibility 101 Training](#)
- ✓ [ODE SNP Meal Access and Reimbursement webpage](#)
- ✓ [ODE SNP Direct Certification webpage](#)

Regulatory Reference:

- ✓ [7 CFR 245](#)
- ✓ [7 CFR 210.18\(g\)\(1\)\(i\)](#)
- ✓ [Oregon Administrative Rule 581-051-0615](#)
- ✓ [Oregon House Bill 2536 \(2021\)](#)