

Feeding your children

Ohio kids to receive \$300 each for free school meals they've missed because of the pandemic

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Local Matters executive chef Korir Russell prepares a table of produce from the Local Matters Veggie Van at the East Main Health Center on Thursday. Through June 30, families that participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can receive an unlimited dollar-for-dollar match on fruit and vegetable purchases through the Produce Perks program at locations like the Veggie Van, a mobile farmer's market. [FRED SQUILLANTE/DISPATCH]



Local Matters mobile market manager Monique McCoy, left, and executive chef Korir Russell, right, prepare a table of produce from the Local Matters Veggie Van at the East Main Health Center. [FRED SQUILLANTE/DISPATCH PHOTOS]

Ohio families with children who qualify for free meals at school will receive hundreds of dollars from the federal government this month to spend on food.

The goal is to make up for free meals missed this spring, when schools closed for roughly the last 10 weeks of the 2019-20 school year to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Ohio families don't need to apply to participate in the federal program, called Pandemic EBT. Those who qualify, about 850,000 children statewide, will automatically receive the funds, about \$250 million total.

Households that have been eligible for federal food assistance since March will receive \$302 for every school-age child, or \$5.70 for every day that school buildings were closed. Those eligible since April will receive \$239.



Katerina Harris, 27, of Olde Towne East, frequents the Local Matters Veggie Van, usually buying onions and bell peppers, but adding peaches during a recent trip.

As benefits rolled out this past week, advocates and state officials are trying to spread the word — especially for families that have never participated in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) before.

They'll be mailed a debit card for each child that must be first activated.

“We want people to know this is the real deal; it isn't some kind of scam,” said Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, the executive director of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks.

“The card you're holding could be worth \$250 or \$300 at the grocery store. Don't throw it in the trash.”

Those who already receive SNAP benefits — about 507,000 of the 850,000 eligible households, according to federal documents — will see additional amounts added to the Ohio

Direction Card they already use.

All 50,000 students enrolled in Columbus City Schools will receive Pandemic EBT funds. The district participates in a federal program that provides every student a meal because of the district's sizable concentration of students from low-income families.

The federal program is slowly rolling out nationwide, with states required to submit a plan to participate. It finally reaches Ohio about three months after lawmakers created it as part of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, effective April 1.

By April 16, more than a dozen advocacy groups submitted a letter urging Gov. Mike DeWine to act quickly. Ohio's approval letter is dated May 11. A New York Times analysis estimated that just 15% of eligible children nationwide had received funds as of May 15.

All of Ohio's new Pandemic EBT cards entered the mail between June 11 and 19, according to state officials. They should arrive within a week of their mailing date.

Though it's slow-going, advocates say, it's still good timing.

Even during ordinary summers, many families struggle to keep children fed, said Adam Fazio, director of development with Local Matters, a Columbus nonprofit group focused on food education, access and advocacy.

And throughout this month, families that receive SNAP benefits can get an added bang for their buck if they participate in Produce Perks, a program also funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that matches every dollar spent purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables.

Through June 30, to help families struggling with the aftereffects of the coronavirus, the program has no spending cap. Typically it's limited to a \$20 match per purchase.

That expansion could continue past June 30 and is being evaluated month to month, said Tevis Foreman, executive director of Produce Perks Midwest, based in Cincinnati.

A list of participating locations is available at produceperks.org/locations.

Katerina Harris, 27, of Olde Towne East, has collected a plastic bag full of bright green Produce Perks coins from her weekly visits to Local Matters Veggie Van, a mobile farmer's market the group operates on Thursdays near the community center where she works.

The artist always buys onions and bell peppers and just recently picked up peaches, she said.

Harris, whose brother is a sophomore at East High School, said she knows her mother will be happy to receive the extra Pandemic EBT money toward meals.

"Teenagers, and especially teenage boys, they'll eat you out of house and home," Harris said from behind a sunflower-print face mask.

"This helps stretch your money as much as possible."

If your family qualifies for the Pandemic EBT program and you don't receive a card in the mail, call the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services at [1-866-244-0071](tel:1-866-244-0071). awidmanneese@dispatch.com