



An Open Letter to Louisiana's Citizens: Will Louisiana Refuse Food for Hungry Children?

Thursday, January 18, 2024

Dear Louisiana Friends,

Most hungry children in the United States will benefit from the USDA's Summer EBT (electronic benefits transfer) program. As it stands, Louisiana's children will not. At least not until our Governor and the Department of Education choose to participate.

Nearly 600,000 Louisiana children would benefit if we participated. Louisiana, ranked next to last in the nation for child poverty, is one of only 14 states refusing food for children.

Louisiana missed the USDA's January 1 deadline. Louisiana Department of Education chose not to participate because of Louisiana's change in governors. The Department of Children and Family Services, not the decider in this but the implementing agency, stands ready to make it happen "at the appropriate time."

The USDA has extended a grace period. Still, Louisiana has not yet enrolled.

There is never a good reason to keep food from hungry children, but some questionable reasons for Louisiana's delay or refusal to accept Summer EBT funds for hungry children have been reported. Fortunately, it seems easy to counter unfounded reasons.

1. Louisiana is not participating in the program due to the change of governors.

Louisiana's new governor has been in office long enough for our state to take advantage of the USDA's extended deadline.

2. There are more important political issues at play right now.

Important political issues are always at play in Louisiana, but politics must never become more important than the well-being of our children. If Louisiana's refusal is a consequence of putting politics before children, then we know we can do better.

3. Louisiana wants to participate, but we do not have the ability to deliver these electronic funds to care for our hungry children.

Is this true? Probably not. Louisianans are the people who *make things happen* in crises. Also, Louisiana has done this before. In 2021, the Department of Children and Family Services and the Department of Education found a way to quickly implement P-EBT (Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer) and helped feed Louisiana's children.

There is also this: if it *is* true that Louisiana cannot distribute Summer EBT, then we have never heard a louder call for Louisiana's leaders to build and maintain the child well-being infrastructure that our children and families require and deserve.

4. This will cost Louisiana money.

Not really. By feeding children, Summer EBT will put new money into communities where we buy our food. *Not* participating will cost Louisiana money. Tennessee, which announced this morning that it has decided to participate, found that "every dollar spent on Summer EBT generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in local economic activity."

Sadly, the ultimate cost of refusing to care for children will be paid in the future. Louisiana's future depends upon how well we care for our children today.

5. Louisiana takes too much federal money as it is. We must draw the line somewhere.

Perhaps, but it seems unprincipled to draw the line against children in poverty. We are better than this. Sure, if you, your family, your children, or your business have never benefitted from the federal funds Louisiana receives, then you may be clean enough of federal assistance to cast the first stone against Louisiana's participation. Otherwise, you have no valid argument against Louisiana receiving the USDA Summer EBT funds and feeding hungry children.

One fact is clear: 27% of Louisiana's children live in poverty. Summer EBT makes sense for Louisiana, our communities, and especially our hungriest children. Louisiana must end this delay and feed our children.

Sincerely,



Rick Wheat
President and CEO