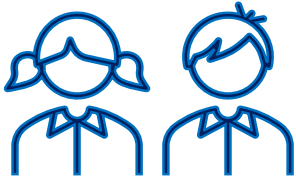
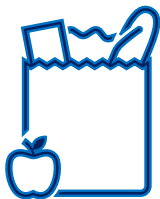


THE PANDEMIC ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER (P-EBT) PROGRAM

Administering Additional Food Assistance Benefits to North Carolina's Students and Children



1.30M children served



\$1.73B issued in food assistance benefits



**20+ teams collaborating across two agencies
– NCDHHS and NCDPI**

State: North Carolina

Agency: NC Department of Health and Human Services

Award Category: Cross Boundary Collaboration and Partnership

Project Implementation: March 2020 – December 2021

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Executive Summary

Following the unexpected rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Carolina moved with speed to issue Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) benefits following the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) guidance for this new program. As schools closed in response to the pandemic, children that received free or reduced-price meals at school no longer had access to meals. The P-EBT program was designed to meet the needs of these children by providing food assistance equivalent to the cost of those meals through EBT so families could purchase food for their children at home. The State collected information from schools and built a new data system to process school data, and later leveraged its existing Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) EBT vendor to distribute benefits to families.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) collaborated to:

- Strategize how to implement to reach the greatest number of eligible families with accuracy
- Minimize the burden on families and staff in eligibility determination
- Draft/submit/receive approval for multiple State Plans and issue benefits
- Develop interagency data sharing agreements
- Build data collection processes and technology systems to support benefit issuances
- Develop communications for impacted populations, key partners, and county offices
- Provide customer service, including the implementation of a bilingual P-EBT Virtual Agent
- Develop best practices for troubleshooting data issues

NCDHHS had to leverage school data to efficiently implement P-EBT for students. Most schools used a student information system (PowerSchool) as a central platform to store attendance records. Based on NCDHHS' data needs and NCDPI's data capabilities, a fruitful partnership was formed.

Through data sharing agreements, this information was extracted from PowerSchool at the local level and provided to NCDPI, along with Free and Reduced-Price Meal program eligibility data from the School Nutrition Offices and sent to NCDHHS to be used in determining P-EBT eligibility and benefits. Because of this partnership, NCDHHS was able to forgo P-EBT applications and implement the program more quickly using NCDPI's existing data. This partnership enabled NC to be one of the first states to receive federal approval and implement each phase of P-EBT.

Both state agencies prioritized P-EBT to issue benefits to those eligible as quickly as possible to ensure children received the nutrition they needed during the pandemic. NCDHHS and NCDPI recognized that a meaningful partnership was key to the success of P-EBT and worked closely together to develop P-EBT State Plans, coordinate access to key information, and establish a regular monthly cadence of data collection and file transfers. The agencies maintained a close partnership by holding regular touchpoints every week before and after implementation to keep communication lines open, to quickly address any barriers, and to resolve issues expeditiously. The agencies worked across divisions/teams and with their local partners to administer and communicate the program to families.

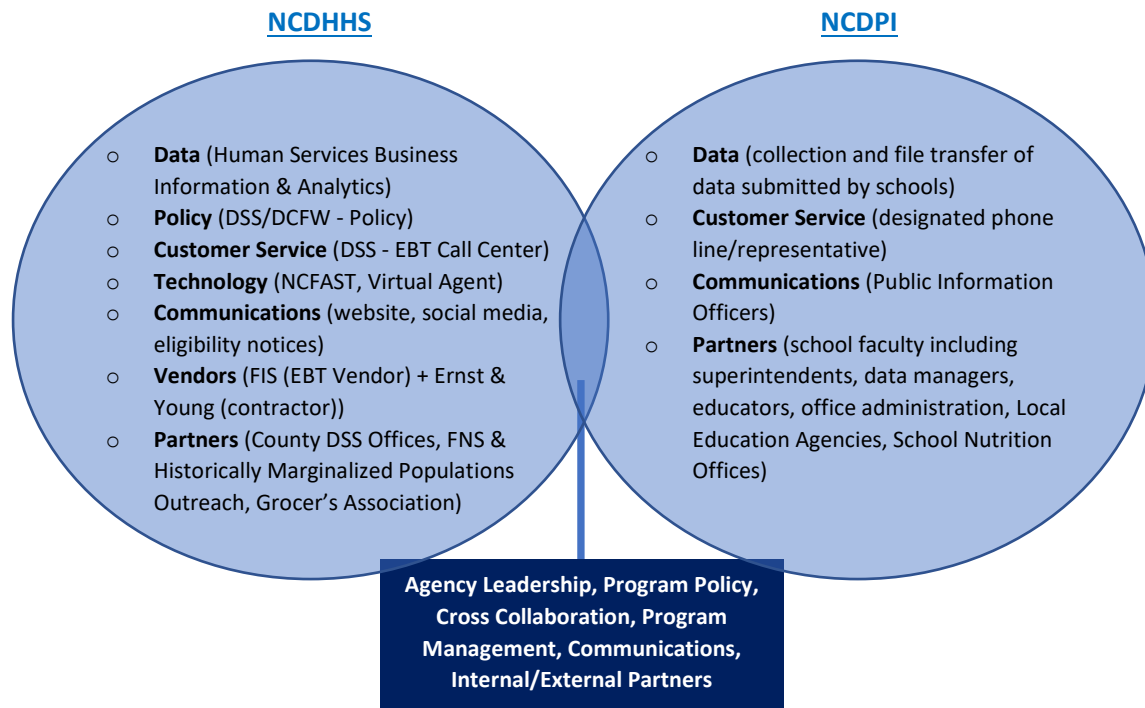
Idea

The abrupt shutdown of in-person classes as a result of COVID-19 presented a multitude of challenges, one of which being food insecurity among North Carolina's students and young children. More than half of NC's school children rely on free or reduced-price meals at school to obtain nutritious meals. Due to physical school closures, hundreds of thousands of children were unable to access a critical source of nutrition. An April 2020 U.S. Census survey estimated that 24% of NC households "often or sometimes"

did not have enough to eat, almost double the 12.9% recorded in December 2018. Of households experiencing food insecurity, 60% had at least one child in the home.

In response to the nationwide food insecurities amongst school-aged and young children, USDA developed the P-EBT program. The program was designed to help families purchase food for their children whose access to free and reduced-priced meals at school or in childcare centers had been impacted by physical closures or COVID-19 related absences. Authorized and funded by the federal government in March 2020, the program provides a benefit on existing household EBT cards or new P-EBT cards that can be used to buy food at authorized retailers, including most major grocery stores.

Due to the complexity of implementing a program like P-EBT, the following teams played an instrumental role in the planning, strategy, and implementation of the program:



P-EBT System Development

NCDHHS created a P-EBT benefit code and developed a new P-EBT system to process NCDPI’s data, apply the program rules (developed by the business team), and produce a monthly issuance file for FIS (the EBT vendor) and notices file for mailing eligibility notices. The system team worked extended hours to develop, test, and implement the P-EBT system quickly. This team made system changes through each new phase as P-EBT was rolled out and continues to do so. The data team within NCDPI and the system team within NCDHHS worked together to meet tight deadlines to issue benefits quickly and accurately, while also programming additional issuances for corrective benefits from updated data.

Because of the reach of this program to families across the state, the EBT Call Center was inundated with phone calls and pressed to meet the customer service needs with its existing resources. NCDPI also developed and staffed a new customer service phone line specifically for P-EBT. NCDHHS’ NCFAST team created business reporting tools to inform customer service calls and troubleshooting. The team has

updated these reports regularly, as they serve as the foundation for partners in providing customer support. Below is a mockup of the 2021-22 school year Business Intelligence Reporting Tool (BIRT).

| NC Department of Health and Human Services NC FAST - Pandemic EBT Program P-EBT Cases Cumulative Report | | | | | |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| County: Macon | | | | | |
| Student Number: 123456 Student Name: John Doe | | | | | |
| Student Profile | | | | | |
| Student Number | Child First Name | Child Last Name | Child Date of Birth | Phone Number | # Schools Enrolled 2021-2022 |
| 1234567 | John | Doe | 4/29/2005 | 111-111-1111 | 2 |
| Family Profile | | | | | |
| Street Address | City | State | Zip | # Students in Family | DPI Family ID |
| 123 Main St | Asheville | NC | 28801 | 2 | 777772 |
| Parent First Name | Parent Last Name | | | | |
| Steve | Doe | | | | |
| Benefit History | | | | | |
| SUI Count | SUI Number (Current) | SUI Number (All SUIs) | Last Benefit Run Month | NCFASST_FNS_Case Reference | New PEBT Card Issued? |
| 2 | | 999999999; 888888888 | 2/18/2021 | 555555555 | Y |
| Sep 2021 Amt | Oct 2021 Amt | Nov 2021 Amt | Dec 2021 Amt | Jan 2022 Amt | Feb 2022 Amt |
| \$ 7.10 | \$ 14.20 | \$ 21.30 | \$ 28.40 | \$ 35.50 | \$ 42.60 |
| Mar 2022 Amt | Apr 2022 Amt | May 2022 Amt | Amt Received YTD (21-22) | Total Virtual Days (YTD) | Total Quarantine Days (YTD) |
| \$ 49.70 | \$ 56.80 | \$ 63.90 | \$ 319.50 | 35 | \$10.00 |
| School Profile | | | | | |
| Current School Number | Current School Name | FRP Eligibility Date | Current Enrollment Start Date | Current Enrollment Exit Date | FRP Denial Date |
| 111 | Made Up High School | 8/17/2020 | 8/17/2021 | 6/30/2022 | |
| Date School Met 5 Day Requirement | | | | | |
| 9/5/2021 | | | | | |

In addition, the P-EBT data team also:

- Worked with external vendors and state DIT for printing and mailing P-EBT eligibility notices to meet tight deadlines and high volume
- Collaborated with FIS to create a new benefit issuance code specific to P-EBT **and** the new card for P-EBT (which differs from a regular FNS card)
- Worked with USDA and controller's office to include P-EBT data on state and federal reports

Implementation

Significant implementation barriers existed in rolling out P-EBT. The first (and most substantial) dilemma was related to timing. Large new programs like P-EBT typically required multiple months/years to implement due to their technical and operational complexity, but families needed food assistance immediately. North Carolina sought to disburse benefits within weeks – **a feat that put NC among one of the first states to issue benefits early in the pandemic**. It became evident early in program planning that the traditional enrollment format of relying on benefit applications would be insufficient to meet the immediate needs of families. In addition, it was clear that the state needed to mobilize teams quickly, pulling in a multitude of supporting teams from both NCDHHS and NCDPI.

Local-level data ownership also posed barriers for rapid implementation. Although the state spearheaded P-EBT, eligibility requirements consisted of local, school-based criteria. Not only did a child need to participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), but their learning institution also must have been closed for a defined period during a given month. It was evident that P-EBT implementation would hinge on the ability to foster a close relationship with NCDPI and engage in unprecedented data

sharing. Teams within NCDHHS and NCDPI (and their data systems) traditionally operated in silos to engage respective stakeholders and deliver services. Agency leadership was challenged to bridge these gaps within the context of pandemic-related shocks to state health and education systems.

The collection of local school-based data also presented an additional challenge. Not all school districts used centralized record keeping; military and tribal districts collected attendance data via their own reporting tools. To serve these students, the state worked closely with these groups to collect data and issue benefits, while also simultaneously modifying the systems to ingest this unstandardized data.

P-EBT also required new collaborative norms between program and IT functions of NCDHHS. In addition to owning most social assistance programs outside of Medicaid, including FNS, the Division of Social Services (DSS) also assumed operational responsibility for P-EBT in 2020. Program and IT teams collaborated to map and build timelines, assess system dependencies, and leverage knowledge of policy and county networks to build a system to adequately meet recipient needs. Despite previous collaborative efforts, the urgency of the pandemic called for immediate integration between teams. In 2022, the P-EBT program transitioned to the Division of Child and Family Well-Being.

“P-EBT needs to be a template for how we do other work at the department going forward, especially the use of existing data for auto-enrollment and the collaborative work across divisions and agencies.”

Zack Wortman, NCDHHS Assistant Secretary for Strategy and Communications

The P-EBT program evolved with the pandemic through the expansion of a new group of eligible children (those under age 6 who weren't students), an extension into summer, and then the continuation for the 2021-2022 school year. With each new phase came new federal guidance that would often require substantial changes in the administration of the program. For example, guidance for Student P-EBT for the 2021-2022 school year indicated that “[students] may receive P-EBT benefits on days that they do not attend school in person and do not have access to a meal service...” As a solution, NCDHHS and NCDPI worked together to develop an administrative attendance code and process to track virtual class attendance and COVID-19 related absences. Ongoing collaboration was essential to continue providing food assistance support to the families impacted by the pandemic.

Communications

Collaboration continued through the development of communications materials. The team had to ensure that statewide recipients understood the program and how they could spend P-EBT funds. North Carolina is one of only nine states with a state-supervised, county-administered social services system; of those nine states, only Virginia has a total number of counties larger than North Carolina's 100 counties. This decentralized management presented challenges to rapid program implementation and getting P-EBT funds to families in need. Many prospective P-EBT recipients had already been receiving public benefits at a county level. NCDHHS built the P-EBT communications strategy to leverage these existing relationships. In addition, NCDHHS leaned on the NCDPI partnership to disseminate information through key education stakeholders. This multifaceted approach to communications enabled NCDHHS and NCDPI to transform their front-line stakeholders into informed P-EBT advocates.

Once channels were identified, NCDHHS and NCDPI worked together to develop a strategy, plan, and key materials for front-line stakeholders. Multiple toolkits were distributed to both internal and

customer-service groups. Through this collaboration, the state distributed materials quickly and shared information in both English and Spanish. As a result a [P-EBT website \(Spanish\)](#) and [Frequently Asked Questions \(Spanish\)](#) were developed and have since been regularly updated. The communication teams worked with the tech team to build content to support the launch of a bilingual P-EBT Virtual Agent.

Communications continued at a local level as NCDPI communicated with school districts and data managers to train them on data collection and how it would be used for issuing P-EBT benefits. It was found that providing a full picture of the information needed along with the “why” increased the timeliness and accuracy of data entry. NCDPI followed up with a regular communications cadence with the districts to reinforce expectations and answer questions. A process for data updates and corrections was also established to address any instances where the information needed to be updated.

“I value our partnership on P-EBT Appreciate all you do to help get our message out on P-EBT! Thank YOU for all the work you put into culminating these resources. They are always so perfectly polished, and they mean so much to our [Public Information Officers].”

Blair Rhoades, NCDPI Communications Director

Impact

NC’s P-EBT program has benefited more than a million children. From Spring 2020 to December 2021, P-EBT has provided a total of **\$1,732,811,063 in food assistance benefits** to **1,308,077 students and young children**.

“I’m telling you it helped out so much!”

Juanita, P-EBT recipient

“[P-EBT is] a lifeline for families with children who usually rely on free and reduced lunch at school during this pandemic.”

Governor Roy Cooper

More than 92% of issued benefits have been spent, demonstrating a need for food assistance in the community. This high spend rate further proves that outreach has been overwhelmingly successful, considering enrollment into P-EBT was automatic and required no further action from recipients. For the past two years and with each new population, NC has been among the **first 5 states to receive plan approval and issue benefits**. NC’s success as a **consistent early adopter of the P-EBT program** and continued implementation has prompted recognition within the state and garnered headlines. Numerous news outlets and county websites have also circulated P-EBT updates and announcements, highlighting its significant impact on North Carolinian families in need.

“[Food insecurity calls] have completely dropped off...I hope you can celebrate knowing you are truly helping families meet their food needs by making these resources so easily accessible.”

2-1-1 Manager

NC’s speed to issue benefits can largely be attributed to the existence of a centralized database, which through NCDPI’s partnership was made available to NCDHHS. Some other states were slower to issue benefits due to the absence of a centralized database and opted to open applications for P-EBT eligibility. The partnership with NCDPI enabled NCDHHS to issue benefits **quickly, broadly, and**

accurately to students and young children in critical need of immediate food assistance. This partnership has eliminated the eligibility application burden on families and the burden on state staff to process applications for this new program.

“[P-EBT] going above and beyond to... provide critical help feeding our state’s children since [school closings].”

Dr. Mandy Cohen, former NCDHHS Secretary

NCDHHS crafted a successful P-EBT communications strategy through a website and social media campaign. From February 2021 to December 2021, the P-EBT [homepage](#) has amassed **1.06M pageviews** and the [FAQs](#) have totaled **229k pageviews**. In NC’s spirit of continuous improvement, the webpage has undergone multiple iterations, each version more user-friendly than the last. Most recently, NC developed a separate Spanish P-EBT [homepage](#) and [FAQs](#) to improve comprehension and experience for its Spanish-speaking users. From June 2021 to December 2021, there have been nearly 6,000 likes, shares, and comments showing wide social media engagement around the program. Public engagement in the comment section has been monitored and managed by the NCDHHS communications team, who strives to answer questions quickly and provide additional information as needed to North Carolinians. Through this communications strategy, NC has widely disseminated key program information in both English and Spanish to keep recipients well informed.

Looking forward, NCDHHS has worked to develop a bilingual virtual agent on the [P-EBT website](#) designed to help households; this innovation serves as the **first bilingual virtual agent for the state**, providing up-to-date helpful program and eligibility information. The P-EBT Virtual Agent shows a powerful intersection between communications and technology, working to provide more efficient and comprehensive customer service to North Carolinians while also minimizing the calls that need to be fielded by state staff.

NC’s P-EBT program illustrates a broader change in the way the state provides services through cross agency/division collaboration. As programs continue to evolve and become more interdisciplinary and complex, P-EBT will serve as the blueprint to implement more efficiently and effectively.