

# Data-Driven Solutions: Improving Access to Food for Minnesota's Most Vulnerable Children

**State of Minnesota: Minnesota IT Services**

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**Category:** Data Management,  
Analytics & Visualization

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A young boy with short dark hair, wearing a bright red t-shirt, is smiling broadly at the camera. He is sitting at a table, eating a meal on a green plastic tray. The meal includes a bowl of rice and beans, a muffin, a slice of pizza, and a whole apple. A clear plastic bottle with a green cap, filled with orange juice, is in the foreground. In the background, another child is visible, also eating. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a school cafeteria or a community center.

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# Executive Summary

Under Governor Tim Walz’s [One Minnesota Plan](#), the state set a goal to ensure that Minnesota children and families have access to basic needs and achieve a high level of well-being. To accomplish this, the administration has made significant investments and built systems to make sure no child goes hungry.

Technology and data have played crucial roles in advancing these efforts by facilitating outreach and simplifying access to resources for Minnesotans. Minnesota’s commitment to becoming a leading state for families is reinforced by data-driven initiatives, especially in guaranteeing food security for children, particularly the most vulnerable. Feeding America reports that in Minnesota, 390,000 individuals, including 120,650 children, are currently experiencing hunger.

Children experiencing regular hunger suffer detrimental effects across various facets of their lives, including academic achievement, social-emotional development, and physical health.

Food insecurity negatively impacts their concentration, memory, mood regulation, and motor skills, all crucial for their overall success and well-being.

Recent advancements in data management and technology, notably within programs such as the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, COVID-19 Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, Direct Certification, Minnesota Free School Meals, and most recent, Summer EBT (S-EBT), have significantly enhanced support for children, aligning closely with the administration’s priorities.

**Why it matters:** Using data and visualization technology, Minnesota expanded access to food programs to children from a diverse set of backgrounds, made it easier for vulnerable Minnesotans to access critical resources, and supported the overall health and wellness of both children and families.



**New students who qualified for free and reduced-price meals: 200,000+**



**Schools served by pandemic meal programs (P-EBT): 593**



**Families that completed WIC applications in 2023: 8,640**

## Idea: Partnering to Ensure Food Access

Under the guidance of the One Minnesota Plan, state agencies such as the Department of Education (MDE), Department of Health (MDH), Department of Human Services (DHS), and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) have sought data-driven solutions to address the needs of Minnesota’s children.

Spurred by lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, programs across the state have enhanced government assistance programs that help put food on the table.

**COVID-19 Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT):** This program addressed food insecurity among children during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated events. It aimed to ensure that children who would have received meals at school could still access nutritious food at home. A collaborative effort between MDE, DHS, and MNIT, the program served students with a diverse set of backgrounds in 593 schools within 517 districts across the entire state.

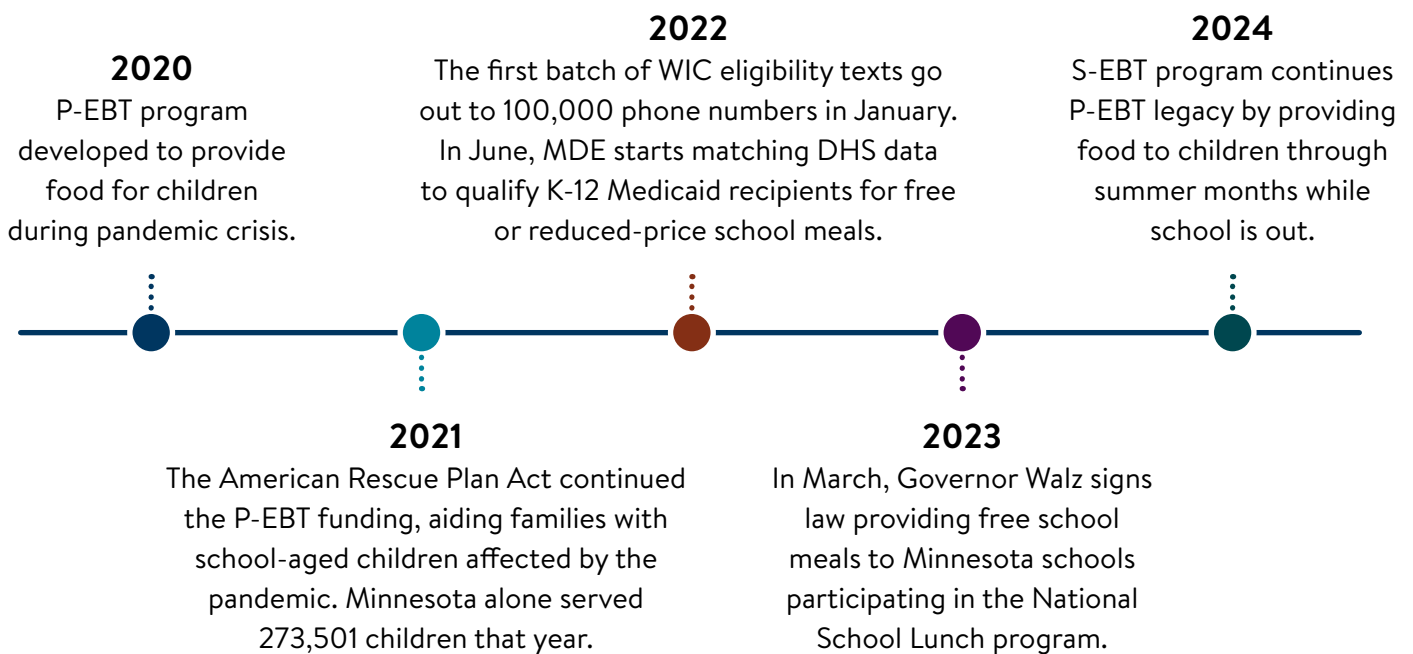
**Connecting Eligible Minnesotans to WIC Program Access:** In late 2020, MDH started a project to improve how it reaches out to people eligible for WIC. Before, the agency sent flyers by mail to people enrolled in Medicaid in Minnesota who were adjunctively eligible for WIC. Minnesota had an opportunity to work with other WIC programs in different states, along with Benefits Data Trust and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. The teams matched data to other programs to send text messages for WIC outreach. As part of the initiative called Leveraging Medicaid and SNAP Data for Targeted WIC Outreach, MDH began

sending text messages in January 2022. MDH continues its WIC outreach through quarterly text messages.

**Direct Certification:** This is a way schools figure out if students can get free or reduced-price meals. They use data matching with information from state or local agencies to determine eligibility. Schools can use this information to automatically say yes to meal benefits for students in those households. That means those households don't have to fill out extra forms.

**Minnesota Free School Meals:** Feeding all children at school supports learning and reduces financial pressure on families. In 2023, Governor Walz signed a law that provides no-cost breakfast and lunch for all students at schools participating in the federal School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program. Data helped to ensure schools received free meals to maximize their eligibility for federal school meals funding to reduce the cost to Minnesota taxpayers.

## Implementation: Operationalize Data Use



The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the State of Minnesota to explore new and innovative ways of utilizing data, particularly in addressing the needs of families. It sparked a collective effort to revolutionize data collection, utilization, and dissemination across various state agencies responsible for serving children and families. While some of these initiatives were born out of the crisis phase of the pandemic, their lasting effects are evident in the state's ongoing data-driven approach.

Specifically, agencies started to use the data collected by federal programs such as Medicaid to determine eligibility for state programs that use much of the same information. These efforts have streamlined processes and expanded outreach.

For instance, the P-EBT program aimed to alleviate hunger among children affected by the pandemic by distributing funds to eligible families through a federally funded initiative administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The overarching goal was to reduce food insecurity and enhance the overall well-being of children and families during those challenging days.

The program was developed in five weeks during the first year of the pandemic. Children in households participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and foster, homeless, migrant, and runaway children received automatic funds on their EBT card without reporting household income.

For those students who did not have an EBT card, but who qualified for free or reduced lunch, DHS collaborated with MDE to identify eligible students. DHS partnered with Code for America to create an online application and worked with counties, Tribal Nations, and community partners to notify eligible families to apply for benefits.

## What has been addressed?

- Tackled food insecurity.
- Supported child nutrition.
- Mitigated educational disruptions.
- Reduced financial burden on families.
- Promoted equity and overall well-being.
- Advanced digital equity by leveraging technology to reduce socioeconomic disparities.

In total, the program ran for four years and supported 470,264 students, and 150,000 of those children were five years old or younger.

Minnesota's use of data and visualization has been evolving, with teams recognizing the potential for data matching and targeted outreach. During the COVID-19 response, the state invested in new and improved texting capabilities. As the state has moved out of the crisis mode, that technology has improved communication and outreach for other programs including WIC.

Before the launch of its text program in 2022, MDH staff conducted quarterly mailing campaigns via the U.S. Postal Service, which incurred significant costs and required substantial coordination. In late 2020, efforts began to transition WIC outreach using Medicaid enrollment data to text messaging, aiming to promote its new online application.

The program utilizes quarterly Medicaid data to identify newly enrolled households with individuals who are pregnant, postpartum, infants, or children under the age of five. This data comprises information such as name, address, phone number, date of birth, and preferred language. Excel macros are used to match the data and generate a list of households for outreach. MDH staff collaborated with MNIT to develop texting capabilities through a web services provider. The effort included translations into Spanish and Somali.

Dr. Diana Becker Cutts, Chair of Pediatrics at Hennepin Healthcare and principal investigator of the [Children's HealthWatch study](#), emphasizes the significance of WIC in shaping children's future health and academic potential. She highlights that scientific evidence underscores the critical role of nutrition during pregnancy and early childhood in establishing the foundation for children's well-being. By providing a nutritious diet during these crucial periods, WIC plays a vital role in safeguarding the health and development of millions of children.

A total of 8,640 households, who received text messages, successfully completed a WIC application in 2023. It's important to note that each household may have multiple WIC participants. Additionally, 239,660 text messages were sent to families new to Medicaid but not enrolled in WIC. This effort led to 3.6% of these families applying for WIC within six months.

### Who is benefiting?

- **Children birth to age five:** Ensured food from birth.
- **Children K-12:** Food resources at home and school.
- **Mothers:** Including pregnancy, postpartum benefits.
- **Parents and Guardians:** Ease burden through difficult life circumstances.
- **Local Businesses:** Supports economic activity and job growth.

The Direct Certification project exemplifies how data has enhanced a service. Direct Certification streamlined the process of determining student eligibility for free or reduced-price meals by obtaining documentation directly from relevant state or local agencies.

Schools can then automatically qualify students from eligible households for meal benefits, eliminating the need for a separate application process. This means parents don't need to take any action for their child to receive meals.

Direct Certification was achieved through two methods: using other source documentation or automated matching. In Minnesota, automated matching was used for the following:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP).
- Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservation (FDPIR).
- Foster Care students placed by County Human Services.
- Medicaid.

Eligibility criteria included: children from households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level qualify for free school meals, while those with incomes up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals.

MDE utilized the Statewide Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) to automate data matching. This involved integrating information from DHS with enrollment data from Local Educational Agencies (LEAs).

Minnesota's strategy involved leveraging existing student data by matching it with DHS records every month, aiming to reduce errors caused by manual data entry. This approach not only minimized errors but also led to decreased expenditure on IT and nutrition program staff hours allocated to operational and maintenance support.

## Direct Certification Phases

Direct Certification was implemented in an iterative approach. The first phase modernized and created a scalable solution, and then the following phases implemented additional functionality to consume data from other programs.

### PHASE I

#### Direct Certification Rewrite

- Automate the Direct Certification process instead of manually initiating batch jobs.
- Retire legacy CLiCS (Cyber-Linked Interactive Child Nutrition System) 1 Direct Certification Module.
- Update IT solution to CLiCS 2 Direct Certification that would be scalable moving forward to reduce the cost of IT maintenance and support.
- Provide users with improved upload capability.
- Provide sponsors and schools with improved reporting capability, such as enabling reports on a full year of Direct Certification information.

### PHASE II

#### Direct Certification Medicaid

- Expand Direct Certification automated process to include Medicaid children to increase the amount of children who were receiving food through a streamlined process that would not require families to fill out an additional application or request.

### PHASE III

#### Direct Certification FDPIR

- Expand Direct Certification automated process to include FDPIR children to increase the amount of children who were receiving food through a streamlined process that would not require families to fill out an additional application or request.

In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature passed the MN Free Schools Meals bill, providing one free breakfast and one lunch, regardless of income, to every student at schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program. With the passage of the law, Direct Certification work continued determining the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals so the state could be reimbursed by the federal government for those students, saving the state money.

Additionally, work turned to updating systems to ensure school districts could easily enroll in the program. MNIT worked with MDE to update the School Nutrition Program application, which resides in CLiCS, by the beginning of May to opt schools into the state-funded program. The CLiCS application made it a seamless process for participating schools to be included in the new program as part of their annual renewal process. Additionally, the project also included updating CLiCS to include the new Minnesota Free School Meals rates for the 2023-2024 school year.

# Impact

Throughout Minnesota, children have reaped the benefits of data-driven decision-making, witnessing its profound impact firsthand. Leveraging data and visualization strategically, the state has stepped in to provide sustenance during crises, ensure crucial resources for mothers and infants, and guarantee students receive essential nourishment to excel in school.

These collective efforts have touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of children across the state. For instance, in the 2022 Direct Certification initiative, DHS shared data with the MDE, revealing that 491,349 Medicaid-enrolled children met the criteria for Free and Reduced-Price (FRP) meal certification.

## Among these children:



**321,782** were identified in student records, with an estimated **202,041** qualifying for direct certification through Medicaid, without prior certification from other DHS programs.



Of the newly certified students, **149,063** were eligible for free school meals, while **52,978** qualified for reduced-price meals.



Approximately **90,000** students eligible for Medicaid-based direct certification were not enrolled in FRP meals.

The Minnesota Free School Meals program continues to employ direct certification to ensure proper federal reimbursement for free and reduced-price lunch, thereby reducing the state's costs.

Direct Certification continued the commitment the Walz-Flanagan administration made to ensure seamless access to food for children during the pandemic through P-EBT. That program provided over \$500 million to an estimated half a million students and young children across the state by using administrative data from MDE and DHS. Additionally, it served students from a diverse set of backgrounds in 593 schools within 517 districts across the entire state. Minnesota is one of 33 states that maintained P-EBT into the summer 2022.

Building on the success of P-EBT, plans are underway to transition it into a permanent initiative named Summer EBT. This collaborative effort aims to bolster the USDA's summer nutrition programs, with the program set to officially launch in summer 2024. S-EBT will provide grocery-buying benefits to low-income families with school-aged children during the summer break.

In the face of escalating food insecurity, facilitating food access for infants and children emerges as a critical support for families. Each family benefiting from these efforts represents a valuable ongoing investment. For Minnesota, these initiatives propel the state closer to its aspiration of being the premier place for children to thrive.