



STATE OF MICHIGAN

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING

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Gov. Whitmer, MDHHS highlight state's successes in helping families gain greater access to food

Priority becomes even more important due to COVID-19

LANSING, Mich. – While keeping Michiganders safe from COVID-19 has been Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's No. 1 priority over the past 10 months, successes in ensuring state residents can feed their families during the once-in-a-century pandemic have been almost as important.

Today Gov. Whitmer is highlighting swift actions her administration has taken during the pandemic to provide access to food for residents whose finances have been affected by the coronavirus.

"Our philosophy is that no one should have to worry about putting food on the table for their families – especially during a pandemic," Whitmer said. "Michiganders need access to nutritious food to keep them healthy so they can succeed in the economy and realize their dreams, and so their children can excel in school and achieve their full potential. I will continue to fight for policies that will improve food security and look forward to working with President Joe Biden and Senator Debbie Stabenow to remove barriers to accessing food assistance."

Last spring Michigan [was the first state to provide food benefits to children who could no longer take advantage of free and reduced-price lunches](#) because they were staying home due to COVID-19. It became one of the first states to deliver [increased monthly food assistance](#) to families that were not already receiving maximum monthly benefits for their household sizes. Michigan also took action to prevent people from losing their food assistance during the pandemic, allowed them to [use their benefits to buy food online](#), and [provided the benefits to eligible college students](#) enrolled in Career and Technical Education programs through a partnership involving the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) and Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

As of fiscal year 2019, one in eight Michigan residents received food assistance. Gov. Whitmer's [Michigan COVID Recovery Plan](#) provides more support for families through food assistance so more Michiganders can afford to put food on the table for themselves and their families.

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MDHHS's Economic Stability Administration provides food assistance to low-income households using federal dollars from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The department partners with Community Action Agencies across the state and the Food Bank Council of Michigan to combat food insecurity. MDHHS's Aging & Adult Services Agency works with local Area Agencies on Aging to address the food needs of Michigan's aging adults.

"Every day MDHHS staff in local offices from Southeast Michigan to the Upper Peninsula work to provide residents with access to food through SNAP benefits," said MDHHS Director Elizabeth Hertel. "It's one of the most important things our department does. Our staff stepped up without missing a beat during difficult circumstances and met the increased need for food assistance that was created by the pandemic – even while our employees adjusted to working remotely to keep everyone safe."

In May, more than 1.5 million Michiganders received more than \$263 million in benefits from the Food Assistance Program. That was up from fewer than 1.2 million people who received more than \$137 million in February – prior to the first COVID-19 cases being identified in Michigan. As the state's economy has reopened, the number of people receiving food assistance has dropped to under 1.3 million, but the need is still great.

The Pandemic-EBT program that helped feed nearly 900,000 children who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches at school accounted for a significant portion of the increase. MDHHS quickly applied for and received federal approval for the program – making Michigan the first state to offer Pandemic-EBT. The benefits were available in March, April, May and June. MDHHS partnered with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and is awaiting federal approval of renewed Pandemic-EBT benefits.

Other actions that Whitmer and MDHHS took to address food insecurity during COVID-19 include:

- Starting the [Restaurant Meals Program](#), through which aging adults, residents with disabilities and homeless people can use their food assistance to get hot prepared meals at participating restaurants. The program also helps an industry that has been negatively impacted by COVID-19.
- Forming a [Food Security Council](#) that has made recommendations that are being implemented to address food insecurity.
- Providing home-delivered meals to older adults through Michigan's aging network. More than 46,000 people received more than 6.4 million home-delivered meals from March through September 2020 – an 8% increase in the number of meals.
- Providing home-delivered meals to older adults through Michigan's aging network while congregate dining sites were closed during the pandemic. More than 37,000 congregate meal participants received more than 1.6 million home-delivered meals during fiscal year 2020.

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- Distributing 47,600 [quarantine boxes](#) of 20 meals each to adults 60 and over through Area Agencies on Aging, as well as arranging for 115,428 USDA-produced boxes to be distributed to older adult by the local agencies.
- Distributing 230,000 USDA Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers to allow older adults to get local, fresh fruit and produce.

MDHHS also implemented a 15% increase supported by Whitmer and MDHHS and secured by Sen. Stabenow (D-MI) in the recently enacted Coronavirus Relief Act. This will increase food assistance benefits by \$102 per month for a household of four, for six months.

“The COVID19 pandemic brought economic challenges to many Michigan households. Swift government action provided by the Governor’s administration brought emergency relief from the toxic stress of food insecurity,” said Phil Knight, executive director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan.

“At the same time, many who faced food security pre-COVID-19 have become more vulnerable; specifically, older adults, those quarantined or at greater health risk, individuals with disabilities, and those without transportation and/or residing in rural or underserved communities,” he said. “High food insecurity rates also correlate with pronounced racial disparities, in a manner similar to health disparities and COVID-19 health outcomes. By forming commissions and task forces to address these needs, collaborative efforts between state government and community-based organizations, like the Food Bank Council, Governor Whitmer has allowed partnerships to form that will last long after the pandemic is past. There is still much to do to meet the need but the political and personal will is present to address the challenges made plain by the pandemic.”

To apply for food assistance or other public assistance benefits, go to www.Michigan.gov/MIBridges.

Information around the COVID-19 outbreak is changing rapidly. The latest information is available at Michigan.gov/Coronavirus and CDC.gov/Coronavirus.

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