

Hungry family? 'Pandemic EBT' card can provide relief

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Parents and guardians of children in the Charlotte Valley, Sidney, Unatego and Walton school districts can worry less about keeping kids fed this summer.

In late May, in response to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance announced \$884 million in federal funding for New Yorkers with school-aged children previously receiving free and reduced-price meals.

Krista Hesdorfer, a child nutrition programs specialist with Hunger Solutions New York, said the nonprofit organization is "helping to raise awareness" of the funding. Application to the program is not required, she said, and families will receive \$420 per eligible child in the form of a debit-style "Pandemic EBT" card.

"This was a new crisis response program authorized through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and is being administered at the federal level by the USDA and at the state level by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance," she said. "Because (the cards) are being issued automatically, a lot of families may not realize the benefits are coming, so we want to help people understand what to expect."

Eligibility, Hesdorfer said, is child-specific, though all students in Community Eligibility Provision districts, such as Charlotte Valley, Sidney, Unatego and Walton, will automatically receive the benefits.

"It is true that all students that attend CEP schools will qualify for P-EBT, because all those schools qualify for free meals," she said, "but you don't have to be attending a CEP school to get this benefit. It only depends on if the child was eligible for free or reduced lunch at the time of the school closures."

Hesdorfer estimated that 2.1 million New

York children, primarily from kindergarten through 12th grade, but including some universal pre-K students and older, developmentally challenged students, will receive P-EBT cards.

Families enrolled in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Medicaid will have seen the funds automatically deposited to their benefit cards, Hesdorfer said, while others not enrolled in those programs but still eligible or in participating districts will receive their P-EBT cards in the mail "through August."

"There is still a need to inform families across the board that may not realize the benefit is on those cards, especially the households that received it on their Medicaid card, because that's not the card normally associated with food benefits," she said. "There is a significant number of people receiving their card in August and they'll be getting two mailings: a notice from the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the other will include the card with the P-EBT benefits."

The funds, Hesdorfer said, help more than just recipients.

"It's such a significant benefit for families, but it's also really good for local economies," she said. "We're bringing federal dollars into New York state."

"We're encouraging everyone who receives the benefit to use it," she said. "The benefits will be available for one year after being issued, so that's another thing we're making sure families know. Even if you're in a good spot right now, the benefits may be helpful later on, given all of the economic uncertainty."

Maureen Blanchard, project director with Creating Healthy Schools and Communities, which works with Charlotte Valley, Sidney, Unatego and Walton, said local districts were required to submit student information to the state Department of Education Child Nutrition Program "about a month ago."

"(Recipients) are going to get a letter in the mail with a benefit card that gives (them) \$420 per child that (they) have in school, to spend on nutrition for the summer," she said. "(The letter) will have the child's name and date of birth and you'll need the child's date of birth as part of the PIN number to use with the card."

Hungersolutions.org notes that cardholders cannot give their card to another person or household. The P-EBT cards can be used in tandem with other nutrition programs, including SNAP and WIC. Like other food assistance programs, Blanchard said, the P-EBT funds must be used specifically.

"You can't buy a roast chicken from the deli, but you can buy chicken," she said, "and canned goods, milk, and yogurt; so, you just can't buy prepared food or paper products."

Blanchard encouraged families who receive P-EBT cards but truly don't need the extra help to give back.

"If ... you get the money and you don't need it, let's support local food pantries and get food into them," she said. "(Cardholders) can use the cards and buy food and donate to local food pantries. They cannot give the card to the food pantry, but they can donate the food."

Because pandemic-related need among food pantries is varied, Hesdorfer said, potential donors should call food pantries before donating.

"If a family is so inclined and wants to make a donation to a food pantry, that's a lovely thing to do," she said, "but contact the food pantry first and make sure they do need donations and (ask) specifically what they need."

For more information on the program and eligibility, visit hungersolutionsny.org/PEBT. For questions following receipt of the P-EBT card, call the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance helpline at 1-833-452-0096 or email otda.sm.eisp.PEBT@otda.ny.gov.