

Background

The Child and Adult Care Food Program—more commonly known as CACFP—is a federally funded program that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks served to eligible children enrolled in participating early care and education (ECE) programs, both centers and family child care homes. Participation in this program can contribute to the overall health, growth and development of young children ([USDA Food and Nutrition Service](#)). With only 35% of eligible child care centers and 59% of eligible family child care homes participating in CACFP, there is an opportunity to find innovative ways to increase participation in this critical program and improve child care quality.

Increasing CACFP Participation

To better understand the challenges of CACFP participation among ECE programs, the Iowa Department of Education developed and conducted a survey in 2020. The survey asked about the barriers and benefits of participating in CACFP. The goal of the survey was to create resources and interventions to address these identified barriers and ultimately increase participation. The Iowa Department of Education's partners such as Child Care Resource and Referral and Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children distributed the survey electronically. More than 350 ECE programs completed the survey. The results showed that the top three perceived barriers to participation in CACFP were: 1) too much paperwork was required; 2) complicated rules; and 3) the costs or work involved exceeded the benefits. In response to the survey results, the Iowa Department of Education partnered with the Department of Public Health to accomplish the following:

- Developed new CACFP promotional flyers "What CACFP Can Do for Me?" highlighting the benefits of participating in CACFP for ECE programs. The flyers are available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).
- Partnered with Child Care Aware of America to create the CACFP Participation in Iowa Story Map. The GIS story map illustrates CACFP participation, food access, and family poverty across the state and helps users understand disparities and opportunities.
- Launched the CACFP Ambassador Program. An ECE provider currently participating in CACFP can apply to receive a \$300 Ambassador Stipend to mentor an ECE provider who does not participate in CACFP and assist them to apply to participate in CACFP.
- Developed CACFP online training, a three-lesson module that provides training and step-by-step guidance on how to apply for CACFP for ECE program staff.

Connecting with ambassadors to promote CACFP

From 2020–2021, CACFP ambassadors mentored 20 non-participating family child care home providers to support their eventual applications to participate in CACFP. The Iowa Department of Education identified 31 ECE center ambassadors and 23 centers were also assisted to apply for CACFP. During this time, the Department of Education received more than 60 phone calls from interested child care centers inquiring about CACFP.



Though the CACFP Ambassador Program pilot started right before COVID-19, which created challenges in recruitment, there was still interest in participation from both mentors and mentees. The Iowa Department of Education and its partners feel this is a good indicator of the success and outreach of the ambassador program given the hardships that COVID-19 brought to the ECE sector.

“The Iowa Department of Education Team Nutrition Co-Director remarked that “our Bureau has continued to increase the mentor connections to assist with CACFP application across the state. The program has built a strong base to increase CACFP participation into the future.”

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During the semester-long course, these individuals participated in required lectures, videos, readings, module quizzes, and a final knowledge assessment.

To learn more

To learn more about this success story, please contact Erin Olson at erin.olson@idph.iowa.gov or to learn more about HKHF TAP, e-mail hkhftap@nemours.org.

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