



On April 21, 2022, the Administration for Children and Families released an [Information Memorandum](#) (IM) clarifying the definition of “public assistance” in the Head Start Act to include receipt or eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. This IM, effective immediately, simplifies the eligibility and enrollment processes for Head Start programs and requires changes to policy and practice.

The Connection Between Head Start and SNAP

The connection between Head Start eligibility and SNAP was born out of President Biden’s “Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government.” The Executive Order focused on simplifying and streamlining processes to improve efficiency. The majority of households with young children who receive SNAP benefits have incomes below 100% of the Federal Poverty Line, which means they qualify for Head Start. Prior to the IM, families needed to go through eligibility and enrollment processes for both Head Start and SNAP separately. The IM helps families more easily apply to Head Start if they are already enrolled in the SNAP program.

What is the SNAP Toolkit?

NHSA has designed this toolkit to support implementation of the SNAP eligibility change in your program. In subsequent pages, you will find checklists, sample policies, and other additional resources to support your efforts.

What is SNAP?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program provides nutrition assistance to eligible, low-income individuals and households. Individuals receive a monthly benefit via an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card. When a participant shops at a SNAP authorized retail store, their SNAP EBT account is debited to reimburse the store for food that was purchased. Households apply for SNAP by completing an application and providing information about their finances and other circumstances.

Reviewing Key Terms

With this update to Head Start eligibility guidelines, we're reminded that the world of federal laws and standards is complex. We open this toolkit with a refresher on key terms frequently used in conversations around eligibility, specifically focusing on whether (and, if so, how) each relates to the SNAP change.

The Head Start Act

Congress establishes Head Start eligibility criteria in Sec. 645(a)(1)(B)(i) of the Head Start Act. The main categories of eligibility include: children in families with incomes at or below the federal poverty line, families receiving public assistance, children in foster care, and children experiencing homelessness. Public assistance has been updated to include SNAP.

Public Assistance

The standards of eligibility remain the same, but the IM clarifies that the definition of public assistance is meant to include children receiving SNAP benefits.

Categorical Eligibility

Families receiving public assistance—which includes SNAP, TANF, and SSI—are categorically eligible for Head Start, meaning they don't need to provide proof of income, just evidence of this public assistance. Programs should use their selection criteria to prioritize service to families based on need.

Income Verification

To verify a child's eligibility status based on SNAP receipt, programs will need to examine and maintain a copy of the child's SNAP documentation. With documentation of SNAP benefits, programs do not need to verify a child's income eligibility.

Funded Enrollment

The IM does not change anything about a program's funded enrollment. The IM simply clarifies who is eligible, but does not change how many children a program should serve or how a program should prioritize selection for enrollment.

SNAP Verification

Eligibility can be determined by verifying the family is receiving SNAP benefits. Valid documentation includes: the approval notice for SNAP; the EBT Card with ID number; or other SNAP eligibility documentation.

Implementation Checklist

Incorporating the SNAP change into practice requires active efforts in several areas of your program. You can use the following checklist to ensure your program has considered the various changes and updates needed to implement SNAP eligibility.

- **Review Your Community Assessment**

Your community assessments provide valuable information about SNAP usage in your service area. Review your community assessment to understand how this change may affect the number of eligible children and families and where they are located, particularly those most in need of services. If your community assessment doesn't contain this information, consider doing an update focusing on SNAP.

- **Review ERSEA Policies**

Review all ERSEA-related policies in your program and update those necessary to explicitly include SNAP under the definition of public assistance.

- **Review Selection Criteria**

The inclusion of SNAP within the definition of public assistance does not guarantee children on SNAP a slot in your program. You'll need to integrate SNAP usage into your selection criteria based on what you learned by reviewing your community assessment to determine where SNAP use fits into your program's prioritization.

- **Submit Updated ERSEA Policies and Selection Criteria to Board and Policy Council for Approval**

Submit all official changes to your ERSEA policies and selection criteria to your policy council and governing board for discussion and approval.

- **Update Database and Intake Forms**

Whether digital or hard copy, your forms will need to be updated to include SNAP eligibility. Review all of your databases and intake forms to ensure this information can be collected and stored appropriately.

- **Update Recruitment Materials**

Updating recruitment materials is a great way to let families and your community know about the changes to Head Start eligibility. Review any print or digital recruitment materials (websites, posters, etc.) and highlight all SNAP recipients are eligible.

- **Train Staff**

All staff at your program need to be aware of this change to ensure messaging around the SNAP update is consistent. Specific staff roles, such as ERSEA and family engagement staff, will need specific training on policy changes, new procedures, and changes in forms and databases.

- **Communicate Changes to Parents**

Current and former families are some of our best recruiters! Make sure to share this information with all parents and encourage them to connect with others in their community who may be newly eligible.

- **Communicate with Community Partners**

Community partners are great advocates for Head Start. Make sure to share updated recruitment information and have conversations to explore additional partnership opportunities.

- **Check in with Your State Head Start Association**

State Head Start associations and Head Start state collaboration offices are actively working to develop state-level agreements and partnerships with the state agencies that administer SNAP to facilitate: data sharing and matching, outreach and promotion, coordinated referrals, and staff training. Connect with your association and/or collaboration office to understand their progress and scope.

- **Involve Your Health Services Advisory Committee**

Presenting the SNAP update can help members generate ideas about partner opportunities, recruitment, and more. Inviting a SNAP representative to join your Health Services Advisory Committee is a great way to strengthen connections.

- **Connect with Local SNAP Offices**

Explore collaboration planning with local SNAP offices to create a more seamless process of referrals to Head Start and vice versa. Programs should ensure the privacy of Head Start families personal identifiable information and be aware of any state-level agreement with your state association.

Sample Selection Criteria

While everyone's selection criteria varies based on community need, the following is an example of a selection worksheet with SNAP eligibility incorporated. This program explicitly lists SNAP in the "Family Income" box on the bottom left with association prioritization points.

Selection Process		Information from Application	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review completed applications to determine priority situation and score 2. Prioritize applicants first by priority situation, then by score 3. As space becomes available, enroll based on priority situations and scores <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Children meeting priority situations are enrolled first, then children with the highest scores are enrolled 		<div style="text-align: right; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnant Woman </div> <div> Name: _____ Date of Birth: ____/____/____ Eligibility Type: <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Income <input type="checkbox"/> Homeless </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Foster Care <input type="checkbox"/> Public Assistance </div> </div>	
Selection Priority			
Situation		Total Score	

1. Mark which priority situation applies to child/pregnant woman. (Choose only one)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Priority 1: EHS child transitioning to HS <i>(Must have application; may include over-income)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Priority 2: Homeless or Child in the Child Welfare System <i>(protective supervision, foster, kinship, adoption program)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Priority 3: Child w/ Diagnosed Disability <i>living at or below poverty guidelines</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Priority 4: Four-Year-Old Child <i>living at or below poverty guidelines</i>

2. Mark all situations that apply, add for total score .													
<div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <u>Parenting situation</u> (Choose only one) </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Child being cared for by a foster parent or in DCF shelter placement or being cared for by relative/friend</div> <div>+20</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Child cared for by a single parent</div> <div>+15</div> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <u>Parent's Current Age</u> </div> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 30%; text-align: left;">Mother</th> <th style="width: 30%; text-align: left;">Father</th> <th style="width: 40%;"></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Below age 14</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Below age 14</td> <td>+30</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> 14 through 16</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> 14 through 16</td> <td>+20</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> 17 through 19</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> 17 through 19</td> <td>+10</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <u>Family Income</u> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Zero income, receiving SSI or TANF, SNAP, homeless, or foster care</div> <div>+100</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Income 75-100% below poverty</div> <div>+95</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Income 51-74% below poverty</div> <div>+90</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Income 0-50% below poverty</div> <div>+85</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Income above poverty guidelines</div> <div>+0</div> </div>	Mother	Father		<input type="checkbox"/> Below age 14	<input type="checkbox"/> Below age 14	+30	<input type="checkbox"/> 14 through 16	<input type="checkbox"/> 14 through 16	+20	<input type="checkbox"/> 17 through 19	<input type="checkbox"/> 17 through 19	+10	<div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <u>Social Needs/Concerns</u> (Mark all that apply) </div> <div style="display: flex; flex-wrap: wrap; padding: 0;"> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol/substance abuse</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Domestic Violence</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Parent Incarcerated or Deported</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Farmworker Family</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Non- English speaking parent or child</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Referred by Community Agency</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Shares housing w/ several families</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Has a continuity record from another EHS,HS or MSHS center</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Documented physical/health/developmental or mental health issue of child or family member in household and in need of specialized care</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Live in the housing complex or surrounding community near center</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Sibling of currently enrolled child</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> No Transportation</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Parents education less than High School diploma/GED</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Human Trafficking</div> <div style="width: 50%;"><input type="checkbox"/> Sexual Abuse</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-top: 10px;"> <div>1 social concern = +10</div> <div>2 social concerns = +30</div> <div>3 social concerns = +50</div> <div>4 social concerns = +60</div> </div> <p style="margin-top: 10px;">If more than four needs are marked add 15 points for each additional need</p> <p style="margin-top: 10px;">Total # of social concerns marked above: _____ Total # of points: _____</p>
Mother	Father												
<input type="checkbox"/> Below age 14	<input type="checkbox"/> Below age 14	+30											
<input type="checkbox"/> 14 through 16	<input type="checkbox"/> 14 through 16	+20											
<input type="checkbox"/> 17 through 19	<input type="checkbox"/> 17 through 19	+10											

Sample Staff Announcement

The following is an example of language you can adapt to share the SNAP update with your staff.

Dear Staff,

We are excited to announce we received notification on Thursday, April 21, from the Office of Head Start (OHS) that Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are now categorized as “public assistance” when determining Head Start eligibility. This policy change is effective immediately and minimizes the burden of applying for Head Start. Families that are eligible for one federal assistance program, like SNAP, can now more easily enroll in other services, like Head Start.

Families that currently receive SNAP and want to apply for our early childhood education programs, including school-based and home visiting, are already income-eligible. Prior to this policy change, families had to document their income eligibility for both SNAP and Head Start, which created an administrative burden and increased communications for us and for the family. This change will significantly reduce these burdens and make it easier for SNAP-qualified families to complete our application process.

It is important to keep in mind that there are many factors in addition to income eligibility that are considered before a child can be accepted and placed, including child age, location, and slot capacity. While this policy change does not guarantee an immediate placement, it will greatly reduce the effort required by the family and our admissions team to confirm they are income eligible.

The admissions team is gearing up for our summer push to enroll families for the next school year. We would appreciate employees sharing this message and encouraging friends and family that may be eligible to apply. Our ERSEA team is hosting many application events throughout our service area over the next few months. Information on upcoming events can be found on our website and our Facebook and Instagram pages. Families can apply in person or remotely. Check the Contact Us page for details.

We applaud the work of the National Head Start Association (NHSA), members of Congress who advocated for the addition, and the Office of Head Start for championing this change that provides more equitable access to Head Start services

Sample Announcement to Existing Community Partners

The following is an example you can adapt to share the SNAP update with your partners.

Dear Partner,

Our team is gearing up for the summer push to enroll families for the upcoming school year and we have some exciting news!

Recently, the Office of Head Start (OHS) announced that Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits have been added to the “public assistance” category when determining Head Start eligibility. This policy change is effective immediately and minimizes the burden on families seeking public assistance. Families that are eligible for one program, like SNAP, can now more easily participate in other services for which they qualify, like Head Start. While this policy change does not guarantee an immediate placement, it will greatly reduce the effort required by families to confirm they are income eligible.

We would appreciate you sharing this message and encouraging your clients that receive SNAP to apply.

We're in Your Community!

Child & Family Recruitment Events are held at several locations throughout the community on the third week of every month. Our recruitment team is available to provide resources and information on how to apply for our FREE early child education programs.

We will have more availability for three and four year olds next year, and we encourage families that have been on the waitlist to reapply because they have a better chance of being selected. We are interested in attending community events that you are hosting this summer, so please let us know about upcoming events where vendors are welcome!

The admissions office is serving clients in person and remotely. Thank you for partnering with us and sharing information with your families about our programs. Let us know if you need brochures delivered or mailed to you so they can be readily available to the families you serve.

Sample Flyer and Social Media Posts


The following are examples you can adapt to grow awareness about the SNAP change. Download customizable templates of the social media graphics: go.nhsa.org/SNAPsocial. Download customizable templates of the flyer graphic: go.nhsa.org/SNAPflyer

Enrolled in Food Assistance?


Your child now qualifies for Head Start or Early Head Start!

What is Head Start and Early Head Start? Tuition free, high-quality birth to age five child care and education!




Find your local program and start the enrollment process today:






go.nhsa.org/locator



It's easy to prove eligibility with any of the following:

-  Your family's food assistance debit card
-  A notice of approval for food assistance
-  Other official documentation

If you have...

-  A food assistance debit card
-  A notice of approval for food assistance
-  Other official food assistance documentation


Then your child qualifies for Head Start!

Do you qualify for food assistance?

If yes, your child qualifies for Head Start!


Today's List

~~1% milk~~
~~butter~~
~~sandwich bread~~
Head Start



Today's List

~~1% milk~~
~~butter~~
~~sandwich bread~~
Head Start



The National Head Start Association is committed to the belief that every child, regardless of circumstances at birth, has the ability to succeed in life. To learn more, visit nhsa.org.

Additional Resources

NHSA's SNAP Resources

Learn more about implementing the SNAP IM, watch NHSA's recent webinar, and download outreach tools to spread the word: nhsa.org/resource/snap-toolkit

Verification Form Template from OHS

For every family that applies to your program, the first steps are determining, verifying, and documenting eligibility. Programs can use the OHS Eligibility Verification Form to create an eligibility determination record for enrolled participants: go.nhsa.org/SNAPform

Frequently Asked Questions from OHS

With any change comes many questions. Read answers to FAQs about the guidance that adds the receipt of SNAP benefits to Head Start eligibility criteria: go.nhsa.org/SNAPfaq

Official SNAP Website

SNAP is administered by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) through its nationwide network of FNS field offices. Learn more about the program: go.nhsa.org/USDASNAP

State SNAP Websites

Each state has specific eligibility criteria, application details, and resources. Find and contact your local SNAP office: go.nhsa.org/SNAPstates