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\$8 Million in additional federal funds now flowing to Hawai'i to feed keiki

Hawai'i's sees first school meal reimbursement rate increase in 40 years

HONOLULU, Hawai'i — As a result of advocacy from local groups and Hawai'i's congressional delegation, a long awaited boost to federal child nutrition program funds [announced](#) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in February is now flowing into the state. [Hawai'i's reimbursement rate](#) for school meals and other federal child nutrition programs has been increased to 30 percent above the continental U.S. rates, which is projected to bring an additional \$8 million a year to Hawai'i to support healthy meals for children.

With more than 50 additional cents per free lunch or supper served under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), these increased rates will help Hawai'i K-12 schools, child care and early learning, afterschool, and summer programs provide meals and snacks to more than 100,000 children. These nutritious meals and snacks are reimbursed by the federal government at a per-meal rate, set by the USDA. The new funding will be applied to all child nutrition programs in the state, which include the NSLP, the School Breakfast Program, the CACFP and the Summer Food Service Program.

With inadequate reimbursement rates long seen as a major barrier to Hawai'i's participation in federal child nutrition programs, this rate increase for Hawai'i is the culmination of [years of work](#) by local anti-hunger organizations and child advocacy groups as well as the swift action at the federal level by [Hawai'i's congressional delegation and the USDA](#).

“Now with the increase in reimbursement, we encourage other youth service organizations and food vendors to join us in ensuring that no child goes hungry and has the nutritional support needed to thrive,” said Greg Waibel, President and CEO of YMCA of Honolulu, one of the state's longest-serving USDA meals site sponsors. “Families who are near the end of each pay period and have to choose rent over food for their children, single parents living paycheck to paycheck, and children not able to focus on their school work because they are hungry deserve and must have access to nutritious and well-balanced meals.”

Over the last 40 years as the chasm between the true cost of meals and the USDA reimbursement rate grew, the state and schools/organizations participating in these federal

programs have had to struggle to make up the steep difference while meeting unprecedented need.

“Our emergency food system is experiencing increased demand like never before as pandemic-era flexibilities end, emergency relief funding wanes, and the cost of food continues to rise,” said Jordan Smith, Senior Policy Analyst For Anti-Hunger Initiatives at Hawai‘i Appleseed. “With the help of anti-hunger advocates, state legislatures across the country have been passing innovative child nutrition policies that provide relief to working families and feed hungry children. This increased funding allows Hawai‘i the perfect opportunity to follow suit.”

Bolstered by the rate increase, local anti-hunger advocates continue to [call for policies and clear action plans](#) that increase access to and improve the nutritional quality of school meals (*under HRS §302A-405.6, by 2030 the Hawai‘i Department of Education is required to meet the local farm to school meal goal that 30 percent of food served in public schools shall consist of fresh, locally sourced products*).

More federal funding decreases the cost to the state for initiatives like [universal free school meals](#) that would provide a free breakfast and lunch to all school age students regardless of ability to pay. Universal free school meal policies have been found to decrease stigma and lunch shaming while increasing academic performance and food security among students.

The time is also opportune for prioritizing child care and early learning provider participation in child nutrition programs due to the state’s [Ready Keiki initiative](#), which includes both a planned expansion of public pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programs through the state’s public school system and significant increases in state funding for child care subsidies. As Hawai‘i operates pre-k through the public schools, increased public pre-k enrollment will provide more 3- and 4-year-old children with access to meals through the NSLP.

As Hawai‘i expands the state-funded Preschool Open Doors (POD) subsidy program and extends eligibility to families above the federal income threshold, private child care programs are expected to serve a higher number of low-income children on POD subsidies and thus reap significantly higher benefits from CACFP participation.

The rate adjustment will be in place until the USDA completes the second phase of its School Nutrition Cost Study, which will determine a longer-term school meals reimbursement for the outlying areas, including Hawai‘i. The study results are projected for 2027.

The following organizations contributed to this effort and are available for media interviews.

About Hawai‘i Appleseed: *Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice is a policy institute that advocates for economic justice for and with Hawai‘i’s people. Appleseed envisions a Hawai‘i that puts its people first—a Hawai‘i where everyone can meet their basic needs while living happy, healthy and creative lives.*

About Hawai'i Children's Action Network: *Hawai'i Children's Action Network (HCAN) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and the only one in the state of Hawai'i solely committed to advocating for children. HCAN addresses the root causes of poverty and inequity and develops public policies that help children and their families.*

About Hawai'i Afterschool Alliance: *The Hawai'i Afterschool Alliance is a network of individuals and organizations dedicated to supporting and advancing sustainable, quality afterschool, summer learning, and community schools that result in improved academic, social, emotional, and physical outcomes for children and families in Hawai'i.*

About Ulupono Initiative: *A mission-driven venture of The Omidyar Group, Ulupono Initiative was founded in 2009 and strives to improve the quality of life for the people of Hawai'i by working toward sustainable solutions that support and promote locally produced food, renewable energy, clean transportation choices, and better management of freshwater resources.*