

# REDUCING CHILDHOOD HUNGER IN KANSAS



**KANSAS APPLESEED**  
*Justice for all.*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children in Kansas need adequate nutrition for their physical and mental development. Tens of thousands of Kansas children struggle with food insecurity every day – meaning they are not sure when or if their next meal will come. Many federal child nutrition programs are available to meet Kansas kids’ nutritional needs, but Kansas is not taking full advantage of them.

Families living in poverty need outside assistance to meet their children’s nutritional needs, but private programs have limited resources and government programs are not available in many parts of Kansas – especially the rural areas. Additionally, administrative obstacles for government programs are often so burdensome that families are effectively denied access to the program because they can’t complete program application requirements.

In Kansas, childhood hunger could be reduced significantly if advocacy efforts focused on increasing children’s access to ensure the maximum participation of eligible children and families in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the At-Risk Afterschool Meals Component of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

Anti-hunger advocates can help reduce childhood hunger in Kansas by encouraging legislators to pass laws making it easier for schools and communities to expand child nutrition programs in their areas; advocates can also encourage legislators to pass laws prohibiting state agencies from creating unnecessary administrative burdens that prevent eligible families from accessing food assistance and other safety net programs. Advocates can encourage school district leaders to adopt innovative meal delivery models to ensure more children have access to school meals, and advocates can encourage other local leaders to establish community-level summer and afterschool meal programs.

Our administrative and elected leaders at the state and local levels need to enact laws and policies that facilitate and prioritize participation in federal child nutrition programs. By facilitating increases in children’s participation in these nutrition programs, Kansas can ensure tens of thousands more children receive the nutrition they’ve been missing.



# THE PROBLEM:

## Far too many kids are going hungry in Kansas

Childhood hunger can be a hidden problem, with many Kansans unaware that many children in their own communities are going hungry. Nearly one in five children (18.3%) living in Kansas is food insecure, meaning they do not have consistent access to sufficient amounts of nutritious foods, and 47.2% of Kansas public school students live in families with incomes low enough to qualify them for free or reduced-price meals.<sup>1</sup>

The effects of childhood food insecurity are numerous and can be long-lasting, affecting a child's lifelong physical, mental, and cognitive health. Food-insecure children are more likely than food-secure children to be in fair or poor health and to have been hospitalized at some point since birth.<sup>2</sup> Negative health consequences can appear decades later, with studies linking cardiovascular disease, obstructive pulmonary disease, cancers, asthma, autoimmune disease, and depression in some adults to their experiences of toxic stress caused by food insecurity as children.<sup>3</sup> Children with above-average food insecurity are significantly more likely to have psychological distress as an adult. Youth who experience food insecurity of any severity at least once during childhood are more likely to have psychological distress than adults from low-income but food-secure childhood families.<sup>4</sup> Household food insecurity at any age of childhood predicts lower vocabulary, reading, math, and English scores in early adolescence. Early childhood food insecurity is more likely than later childhood food insecurity to result in impaired scores.<sup>5</sup>

Food insecurity has a disparate impact on communities of color. A recent study of food insecurity in the US between 2001 and 2016 found food insecurity rates for non-Hispanic black and Hispanic households had at least double the food insecurity rates than white households. This gap has remained persistent, even as food insecurity levels have fluctuated. Discrimination and structural racism are important contributing factors to this inequity.<sup>6</sup>

## What's causing childhood hunger in Kansas?

Childhood hunger is a complex issue, driven by a combination of causes. If families are living in poverty, they can't purchase adequate amounts of food without outside assistance, particularly when food is taxed at a high rate. Outside assistance is insufficient when there is a limited supply of charitable resources and government resources are impossible to access.

### POVERTY

In 2017, 15% of Kansas children lived in families with incomes below the federal poverty level.<sup>7</sup> For many families with limited resources, less-flexible expenses like rent and utilities

are paid first. Food is purchased with any remaining funds, meaning there may not be enough, and it's often less-expensive, less-healthy processed foods rather than nutrient-rich fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and milk.<sup>8</sup>

### LOW PARTICIPATION IN FEDERAL CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

There are a number of federal programs to help provide nutrition to children in families with low incomes, but Kansas communities and residents are not taking full advantage of many of the programs. As a state, Kansas ranked 40th for children's participation in the Summer Food Service Program, serving 9.6 summer lunches for every 100 free and reduced-price lunches served to children during the 2016-17 school year.<sup>9</sup> Kansas ranks 40th of the 50 states for eligible individuals' participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP - formerly known as food stamps - which is called food assistance in Kansas). In 2016, (the most recent year for which there is available data), 77% of eligible Kansans received food assistance benefits that help them purchase nutritious foods for their families.<sup>10</sup> Kansas ranks 42nd for children's participation in the School Breakfast Program during the 2016-18 school year; for every 100 students who receive free or reduced-price lunches, only 50 eat breakfast at school during.<sup>11</sup>

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## What's causing childhood hunger in Kansas?

### FOOD SALES TAX

Kansas is one of only thirteen states that charges a sales tax on groceries, and, with a 6.5% state food sales tax rate, has the second-highest grocery tax rate in the country.<sup>12</sup> The sales tax makes food more expensive, forcing families with limited resources to purchase smaller quantities and cheaper, less-healthy varieties of food.<sup>13</sup>

### STATE ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS

Since 2011, the Kansas Department for Children and Families – which was known as the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services until July 2012 – implemented a number of internal policy changes which have negatively affected eligible Kansans' access to food assistance, a number of which were codified by the first "HOPE Act" in 2015.

Between the agency-based and statutory changes, the following barriers have been put in place since 2011:

- Reinstatement of the prohibition on individuals with past felony drug convictions receiving food assistance benefits, even when there is no evidence or suspicion that the individual is currently using illegal drugs.<sup>14</sup>
- For eligibility purposes, a modified calculation method for households with undocumented immigrants now divides total household income earned among only family

members who are citizens. This makes the household income for citizen children with non-citizen parents appear larger than it actually is, effectively denying many of them the benefits they would otherwise be eligible to receive.<sup>15</sup>

- Mandatory compliance with child support enforcement for custodial parents, requiring recipients to complete a lengthy questionnaire and maintain ongoing contact with DCF's child support enforcement contractor or risk losing food assistance benefits.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, in 2013, DCF rejected federal grant money for food assistance outreach which the State of Kansas had taken advantage of in previous years.<sup>17</sup> The grants allowed nonprofit agencies to perform food assistance outreach, which included educating potential food assistance recipients about program benefits, eligibility, and how to apply.<sup>18</sup>

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### OVER-RELIANCE ON THE STRETCHED RESOURCES OF FOOD PANTRIES AND FOOD BANKS

Private giving is not sufficient to meet the needs of hungry families. Federal nutrition programs deliver more than 19 times the amount of food assistance as private charitable sources.<sup>19</sup> Kansas families must have full access to government anti-hunger programs.

# A SOLUTION FOR KANSAS FAMILIES: Federal nutrition programs

The vast majority of nutrition assistance in the United States comes from the federal government, which funds the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; the National School Lunch Program; the School Breakfast Program; the Summer Food Service Program; and the Child and Adult Care Food Program, all of which are administered on the Federal level by the United States Department of Agriculture. If Kansas families had full access to these programs, we could essentially end childhood hunger in Kansas.

## SNAP (Food Assistance)

### Provides benefits that allow families to purchase nutritious food

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, provides monthly benefits to families with household incomes at or below 130% of federal poverty guidelines. In Kansas, SNAP benefits are administered by the Department for Children and Families through the food assistance program. Food assistance benefits are provided on an electronic Vision card and can only be used to purchase food.<sup>20</sup> The average food assistance recipient received \$126 per month in 2017.<sup>21</sup>

Food assistance benefits help Kansas families—especially those who are dealing with a recent job loss, illness, or accident—access the nutrition they need. Food assistance is especially critical for children, as it fights hunger to ensure children can succeed in school and have a chance at a better future. Eligible households may include individuals who are unemployed, underemployed, disabled, or transitioning into the work force.<sup>22</sup>

In Kansas, only an estimated 77% of eligible individuals receive food assistance benefits, ranking the state 40th among the 50 states.<sup>23</sup> Low participation is caused by eligible individuals not applying (either because of the stigma surrounding the food assistance program or because of a lack of awareness of eligibility requirements or confusion about the application process) or applying but running into administrative barriers that prevent them from successfully completing the application process.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the myths surrounding the food assistance program in Kansas (and the SNAP program nationwide), program integrity is high. Benefits can be used only to purchase groceries; they cannot be used to purchase prepared food, pet food, medicines, alcohol, cigarettes, or household products like toilet paper.<sup>25</sup>

The total SNAP payment error rate in Kansas, including both overpayments and underpayments, is only 3.85%.<sup>26</sup> The SNAP trafficking rate in the United States, which measures benefits sold by SNAP recipients to retailers at a reduced rate, is only 1.5%.<sup>27</sup>

The nutritional benefits to the food insecure children and families who receive food assistance are the primary advantage of the food assistance program, but the economy as a whole benefits too. SNAP redemptions represent 10% of expenditures on food for consumption at home, they provide important support for small businesses (nearly 80% of SNAP authorized retailers are locally owned small businesses), and they result in greater purchasing power that increases food and non-food purchases (every SNAP dollar redeemed is estimated to expand the economy by \$1.70).<sup>28</sup>

In Kansas, only **77%** of eligible individuals receive food assistance benefits, ranking the state 40<sup>th</sup> among the 50 U.S. states for eligible individuals' participation.

### WIC

#### Provides supplemental nutrition for children and new and expectant mothers

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides checks for the purchase of specific foods for young children and pregnant women, postpartum women (up to six months), or nursing mothers (up to one year). Kansas transitioned to an electronic-based transfer system in 2018.<sup>29</sup>

The USDA estimates only 52% of eligible women, infants, and children in Kansas participated in the WIC program in 2016.<sup>30</sup> Relatively low WIC participation rates can be attributed in part to uncertainties in the appropriations process and to state and local office hours that are not accommodating to working mothers. WIC participation costs have remained stable over the last two decades, and WIC spending as a share of the economy has fallen to its lowest level since before 1997.<sup>31</sup>

### CACFP

#### Provides meals for preschool kids and afterschool meals for school-aged kids

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides reimbursements to participating programs for meals served to children in child care homes, child care centers, and afterschool programs and to adults in adult day care centers. The At-Risk Afterschool Meals component is the newest provision of the CACFP; it allows schools, local government entities, faith-based and secular nonprofits, and for-profit day care centers to provide no-cost meals to children in low-income areas. To qualify, sites must be located within the attendance area of a school where at least 50% of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, and it must offer some kind of enrichment activity.<sup>32</sup>

Sites can serve one meal and one snack each day; on school days, meals and snacks must be served after school ends, but meals and snacks can be served at any time on weekends, holidays, and other non-school days (such as Spring Break).<sup>33</sup> Sites in Kansas were reimbursed \$3.54 for every supper served and up to \$0.91 for every snack served in FY 2019.<sup>34</sup> During the 2017-18 academic year, 176 at-risk after school centers served 452,157 suppers.<sup>35</sup>

The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) is focused on increasing statewide breakfast participation, and to this end they have awarded funding to several districts and schools throughout the state to implement innovative breakfast delivery models and to improve existing school breakfast delivery systems. The preliminary results from this effort have been encouraging. For example, Wichita USD 259 saw an average increase of 27% in middle school students eating breakfast and a 53% increase in high schools.<sup>41</sup>

### SCHOOL MEALS

#### Provide critical nutrition to help children learn all day long

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was created to help provide nutrition for children after World War II, when up to 40% of potential recruits were unfit for military service because of poor diets.<sup>36</sup> The School Breakfast Program (SBP) began with pilot programs in 1966 and received permanent authorization in 1975, providing higher reimbursements to the schools with the greatest need to ensure highest-need students received adequate nutrition at the start of the school day.<sup>37</sup>

During the 2017-18 academic year, Kansas schools served over 333,000 lunches per day, 198,000 of which were served to children qualifying for free or reduced-price meals.<sup>38</sup> That same year, 240,725 children were eligible for free or reduced-price meals; only 82% of eligible kids received a free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>39</sup>

In the 2017-18 school year, for every 100 students who received free or reduced-price lunches, only 50 ate breakfast at school.<sup>40</sup> Without breakfast, over half of Kansas students miss out on nutrition which can help them begin each day ready to learn.

Some Kansas schools use alternative breakfast models to make breakfast more accessible, giving students more time to eat and reducing the stigma that can be associated with eating breakfast in the cafeteria. The three most popular alternative breakfast models are Breakfast in the Classroom, Grab 'n' Go Breakfast, and Second Chance Breakfast. Schools using the Breakfast in the Classroom model deliver the meal to the classroom in carts or bags, where students eat at their desks during announcements, regular instruction, or while the teacher takes attendance.

With Grab 'n' Go Breakfast, students pick up a simple breakfast consisting of bagged or pre-packaged foods from the cafeteria or at a kiosk, then eat in a classroom or during a break. Second Chance Breakfast, served after first period, provides breakfast for students who arrive later or who are not hungry first thing in the morning. Breakfast in the Classroom is generally more popular in elementary schools, while Grab 'n' Go and Second Chance Breakfast models are more common in middle and high schools.

### COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY

#### Provides school meals for thousands more children

The Community Eligibility Provision allows high-poverty schools to provide free breakfasts and lunches to all students. For schools that adopt the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), all students' meals are reimbursed by the USDA according to the number of children who have been identified as qualifying for free lunches based on their participation in certain other government programs (including foster care, food assistance, and TANF). To qualify for CEP, a minimum of 40% of students in a school district, in a group of schools within a school district, or in an individual school must have been identified as a student eligible for free meals (such as those directly certified through SNAP).<sup>42</sup> The percentage of meals reimbursed at the free rate is determined by multiplying the number of direct-certified students by 1.6; if the percentage is less than 100, remaining meals are reimbursed at the paid rate.<sup>43</sup>

Kansas schools have been slow to take advantage of the CEP. In 2014-15, the first year the CEP was available to Kansas schools, only 18 of 258 eligible schools (7%) adopted CEP.<sup>44</sup> CEP participation among eligible schools was 24% in 2015-16, 28% in 2016-17, and 30% in 2017-18. In Kansas, 70% of CEP eligible schools in the most recent school year are still not taking advantage of this valuable program.<sup>45</sup>

### SUMMER MEALS

#### Provide critical nutrition for Kansas children during highest-risk time

During the three months of summer break, school meal programs aren't available to provide the consistent nutrition tens of thousands of Kansas kids from families with low incomes get at school. Federal funding is available through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to fill the summer nutrition gap.

Programs are often run by school districts, but local governments, churches, and other nonprofits are also eligible to sponsor the SFSP. Meals can be served in almost any place kids go during the summer; many Summer Food Service Program sites serve no-cost meals to kids at schools, libraries, swimming pools, churches, camps, and apartment complexes. The organizations running the programs are reimbursed for the meals they serve.<sup>46</sup>

Kansas ranked 48th in the nation for feeding kids through the Summer Food Service Program in 2015, when only 8.2 children received lunches through the SFSP for every 100 who ate free or reduced-price lunches during the previous school year. There has been significant progress since then. In 2017, that number rose to 9.6 children per 100 who ate free or reduced lunches the previous year, bringing Kansas's ranking up to 40th.<sup>47</sup> The total number of SFSP sites increased from 387 in 2014 to 711 in 2018, a rise of 84%, but Kansas will need to continue to increase the number of meals served at sites in order to fill the summer nutrition gap. In 2018, Kansas served 1.42 million meals through the SFSP.<sup>48</sup>



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# IF WE TAKE ACTION, we can end childhood hunger in Kansas

## NEXT STEP:

### Advocate for More Child Nutrition Programs in Your Community

While much of the policy advocacy that happens in Kansas is done inside the capitol in Topeka, there is a need for advocates to work at the community level, encouraging school districts and community groups to implement good policies that will provide nutrition to thousands of Kansas kids.

At the school-district level, advocates should encourage schools to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision and alternative breakfast models and to start school-based afterschool and summer meal programs through the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Service Program. If all Kansas schools with ISPs greater than 60% adopted the Community Eligibility Provision, thousands more kids could have access to no-cost breakfasts and lunches at school every day. If those schools combined CEP with an alternative breakfast model, they would see an even greater increase in students' participation in the School Breakfast Program.

Schools could further fight food insecurity by referring struggling families to DCF or local nonprofits for help in

applying for food assistance and Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) to ensure they are receiving benefits. If qualified students are receiving food assistance and TANF benefits, they will have access to more nutritious foods for the meals they eat at home, and schools will have a direct certification number that better reflects their students' needs, making CEP financially feasible for the schools with students most needing access to CEP and other nutrition programs.

Advocates can also reduce childhood hunger in Kansas by encouraging community groups, such as local nonprofits and government entities, to establish community-based Child and Adult Care Food Programs and Summer Food Service Programs. Advocates can also partner with existing programs (located at schools or at other community organizations) to ensure children and families are aware of the times and locations meals are served and that sites provide engaging activities to draw children to SFSP sites and reduce the stigma that meals are only for kids from families with low incomes.

If you are interested in taking action to end childhood hunger in Kansas, please email [info@KansasAppleseed.org](mailto:info@KansasAppleseed.org)



## NEXT STEP:

### Advocate for Nutrition Programs at the Kansas Legislature

Advocates should push for legislative solutions to childhood hunger, including legislation that would require the Department for Children and Families to remove recently enacted barriers to food assistance participation and that would eliminate the food sales tax in Kansas. Advocates should also push for legislation that would make it easier for schools to offer Child Nutrition Programs.

Advocates should encourage legislators to reverse recent legislation that created food assistance participation barriers, such as the prohibition on receiving benefits for those with past felony convictions and mandatory compliance with child support enforcement. The Kansas legislature should act quickly to ensure these damaging policies are reversed so that struggling families have access to the benefits they need.

The 6.5% state-level food sales tax is a barrier to Kansas families being able to afford better, more nutritious food. It should be noted, however, that this sales tax does generate revenue that funds critical social services. Advocates should push for elimination of this grocery tax, but as part of a balanced comprehensive tax policy that maintains our state's services and fiscal health.

As the legislature considers a new school funding formula, advocates should encourage legislators to include a proxy to replace free and reduced numbers for schools that adopt the Community Eligibility Provision. One of several administrative advantages of CEP is the elimination of the need to collect free and reduced-price meal applications. Under the most recent funding formula, at-risk funding was distributed to districts based on the numbers of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals. Other states have passed laws allowing CEP schools to use a proxy in place of the free and reduced-price meal percentage; many of these states have used the school's or district's direct certification number multiplied by 1.6 as the proxy for the free and reduced-price lunch number.

Advocates can help reduce childhood hunger in Kansas by pushing for legislation requiring high-need districts to offer

meals through out-of-school-time programs like the Summer Food Service Program and the At-Risk Afterschool Meals component of the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Such a statute should require that districts participate in both programs if 49.5% or more of their students qualify for free and reduced-price meals. In the 2018-19 academic year, 129 of the 286 school districts in Kansas met the 49.5% threshold.<sup>49</sup>

If SFSP participation across the state increased from 9.6 students who received a summer lunch for every 100 students who ate a free or reduced-price school lunch to 40 summer lunches for every 100 free and reduced-price school lunches, Kansas schools could bring in an additional \$4,215,345 in federal reimbursements for the program.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, advocates can push for a statute requiring that breakfast be served after the school day begins, known as Breakfast after the Bell (through Breakfast in the Classroom, Grab 'n' Go breakfast, or another alternative model) in schools with greater than 49.5% free and reduced meals. A Breakfast after the Bell statute would provide a significant boost to breakfast participation among Kansas students. If breakfast participation across the state increases from 50 students who receive free or reduced-price breakfasts for every 100 students who receive free or reduced-price lunches to 70 breakfasts for every 100 lunches, Kansas schools could bring in an additional \$10,891,396 in federal reimbursements for the program.<sup>51</sup>

State law currently requires all school districts to provide breakfast in every school building, but waivers can be granted if fewer than 35% of students attending a school qualify for free and reduced-price meals.<sup>52</sup> To ensure that students are receiving sufficient morning nutrition, advocates should encourage the legislature to consider reducing the cutoff percentage, allowing a waiver only in very limited circumstances.

## NEXT STEP:

### Advocate to DCF to increase access to food assistance

Eligible individuals and families are often unaware of eligibility requirements or the application process for food assistance benefits. Communities can help fight childhood hunger by promoting the food assistance program as a healthy option for families who are struggling to afford nutritious foods and by directing individuals to DCF or nonprofit agencies that can assist with the application process.

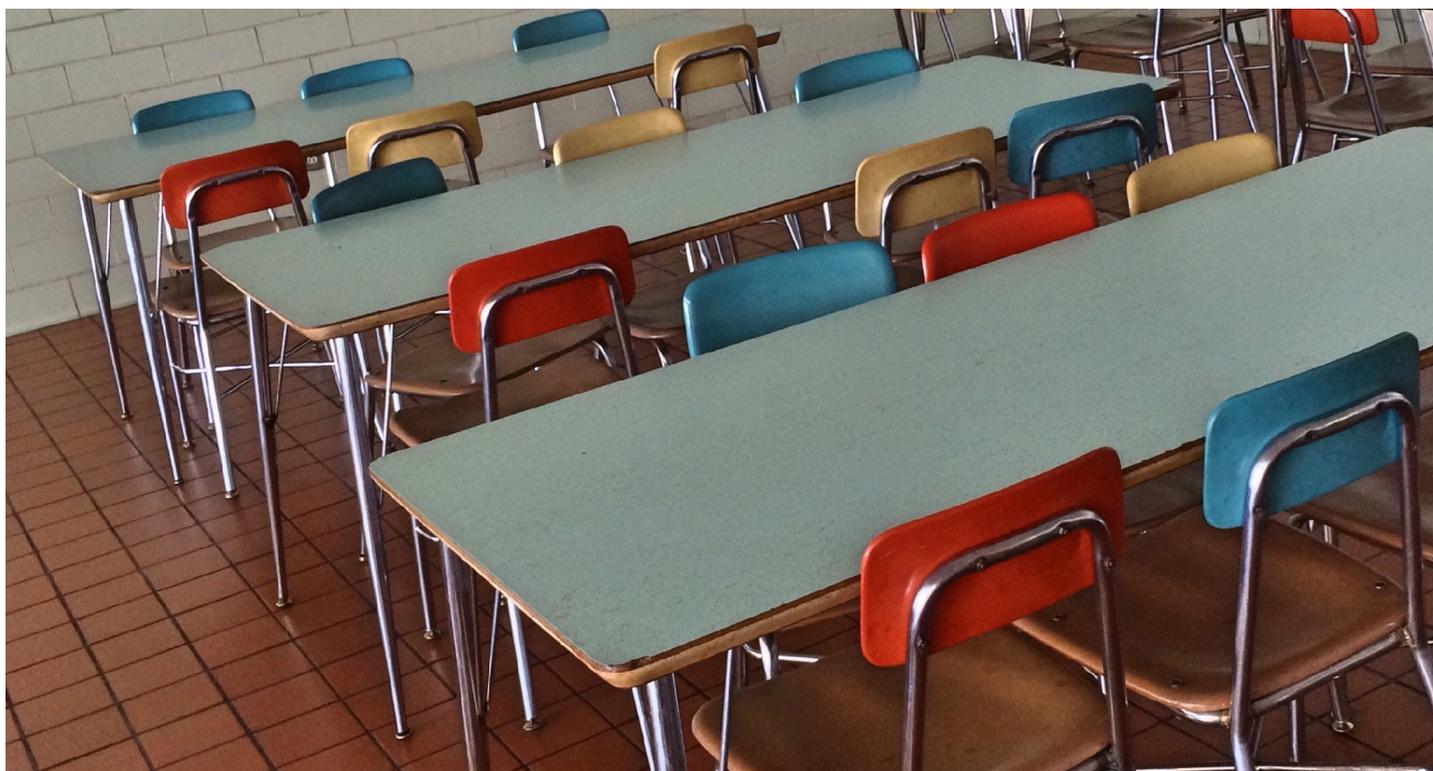
Advocates should encourage DCF to examine all the requirements it places on food assistance applicants and recipients to reduce unnecessary burdens and bring back the policies that ensure benefits are available to help struggling Kansans get back on their feet. When eligible individuals apply for benefits, they should be approved quickly so they and their children aren't going without food while they wait for approval. Recipients' cooperation requirements should be limited to only those steps that are truly necessary to ensure eligibility or that would help move a recipient toward self-sufficiency, so recipients aren't so busy jumping through hoops to maintain their benefits that they don't have time to find a job, get into treatment, or participate in an employment training program.

Advocates should also encourage DCF to renew its food assistance partnerships with Kansas nonprofits and apply for the federal grant funds which would allow those nonprofits to reach out to struggling families and educate them about eligibility requirements and the application process.

## NEXT STEP:

### Advocate to KDHE to increase access to WIC

With only 52% of eligible women, infants, and children receiving WIC benefits, many of Kansas's most vulnerable individuals are missing out on needed nutrition at the most crucial points in their development. WIC agencies should increase outreach efforts – promoting the program to raise awareness and providing off-site opportunities for application interviews – to ensure maximum participation in the program.



# CONCLUSION

Every one of us can play a role in reducing childhood hunger in Kansas. There are many ways to get involved, in many different places.



## IN OUR COMMUNITIES:

- Advocates can encourage schools to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision and alternative breakfast models to maximize the number of children from families with low incomes who receive breakfast and lunch at school.
- Advocates can encourage schools, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and local government entities to create and expand out-of-school-time programs through the Child and Adult Care Food Program and Summer Food Service Program to reach children from families with low incomes afterschool and during school holidays and breaks.

## IN THE KANSAS LEGISLATURE:

- Advocates can encourage legislators to pass laws that would reduce childhood hunger by
  - Requiring the Department for Children and Families to remove recently enacted barriers that prevent eligible families from participating in the food assistance program,
  - Eliminating the state food sales tax, and
  - Facilitating participation in the School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program by requiring high-need districts to offer programs in schools with the highest need.

## AT STATE AGENCIES:

- Advocates can encourage DCF to reduce unnecessary administrative barriers that stand between eligible families and the food assistance benefits they need.
- Advocates can encourage KDHE to increase outreach efforts to increase the percentage of eligible women, infants, and children who participate in the WIC program.

Tens of thousands of Kansas children are unnecessarily experiencing food insecurity. Anti-hunger advocates must encourage the Kansas legislature, state agencies, school administrators, and community members to change state and local policies to remove barriers to participation and allow more Kansas children access to the federal nutrition programs that will allow them to receive three nutritious meals a day.

It is also important to remember that childhood hunger is connected to larger systemic poverty. To effectively address food insecurity, advocates need to take a holistic approach by also pushing for policy changes—including access to affordable housing and a living wage—that address issues stemming from systemic racial and economic oppression.

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