



May 20, 2024

Bill Byford
Director
Tennessee Department of Education.
710 James Robertson Parkway, 10th Floor
Nashville, TN, 37219

Dear Bill Byford,

This letter is in response to Tennessee Department of Education's (TN DOE) April 28, 2024, request to waive certain requirements in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) for summer 2024 operations and also when congregate meal service operations in schools are limited due to natural disasters, unscheduled major building repairs, court orders relating to school safety or other issues, labor-management disputes, or, when approved by the State agency, for a similar unanticipated cause. In order to support continued access to nutritious meals, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) recognizes that certain operational flexibilities may be necessary.

FNS has authority to issue statewide waivers under Section 12(l) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA), 42 U.S.C. 1760(l). To grant a Section 12(l) waiver, the NSLA requires that the waiver must facilitate the purpose of the Program, the public must receive notice and information regarding the proposed waiver, and the waiver will not increase the overall cost of the Program to the Federal Government. FNS finds that TN DOE's waiver request satisfies these statutory requirements.

Specifically, TN DOE requested a statewide waiver of the requirements explained below.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) Operations During Periods of Excessive Heat

The waivers in the section allow SFSP and SSO sponsors, in good standing, to operate approved outdoor meal sites without temperature-controlled alternative sites as non-congregate sites on days when the area is experiencing excessive heat. These waivers may only be used on days when the National Weather Service (NWS) has issued a Heat Advisory, an Excessive Heat Warning, or an Excessive Heat Watch for the area in which an approved outdoor meal site is located. These waivers are effective *May 1, 2024, through September 30, 2024*.

Non-Congregate Meal Service (SFSP/SSO)

Under NSLA, 42 U.S.C. 1753(b)(1)(A), 42 U.S.C. 1761(a)(1)(D), and program regulations at 7 CFR 225.6(i)(15), SFSP meals must be served in a congregate setting and must be consumed by participants on site. Please note that this waiver is not the same as the new option to provide a rural non-congregate meal service as described in Section 13(a)(13) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42 U.S.C. 1761). This waiver is not limited to sites in rural areas and may only be applied to sites approved for congregate meal service.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements to serve meals through the SFSP in a congregate setting. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. FNS also extends the non-congregate meal service flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

Parent and Guardian Meal Pick-Up (SFSP/SSO)

Under the NSLA, 42 U.S.C. 1761(f)(3), and program regulations at 7 CFR 225.2 (Meals), and 7 CFR 225.9(d)(7), SFSP meals must be served to eligible children.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements that meals may only be served directly to children. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. State agencies opting to use this flexibility must have a plan for ensuring that local operators are able to maintain accountability and program integrity. This includes putting in place processes to ensure that meals are distributed only to parents or guardians of eligible children, and that duplicate meals are not distributed to any child. FNS also extends the parent and guardian pick up flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

Meal Service Times (SFSP/SSO)

Under program regulations at 7 CFR 225.16(c)(1), (2), and (3), meals served in the SFSP must follow meal service time requirements.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements that set meal time parameters for SFSP sites. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. FNS also extends the meal service times flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

If a sponsor wishes to use this meal service times waiver, additional requirements apply. The meal service times waiver requirements are intended to ensure that summer meal sites that change the time of their meal service provide adequate notice to the community to ensure there is no loss in program access.

To use this meal service times waiver, sponsors must:

- a) Not change meal service times less than 24 hours in advance of the previously scheduled meal service time,
- b) Put up a printed notice or poster at the site indicating the change in meal service times to attendees,
- c) Alert the community through appropriate channels (such as school or neighborhood listservs), and
- d) Comply with any additional requirement(s) requested by the State agency.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) Operations During Periods of Air Quality Advisories

The waivers in this section allow SFSP and SSO sponsors, in good standing, to operate approved outdoor meal sites without alternative indoor sites as non-congregate sites on days when the area is experiencing certain air quality advisories. The threshold for determining when these waivers can be used is based on metrics developed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC), which are designed to help determine when to move activities indoors. Using these metrics, which equate to very unhealthy or hazardous air quality, sites may be approved for non-congregate meal service on days when the site's zip code has an Air Quality Index (AQI) "purple" flag or higher, as indicated at <https://www.airnow.gov/>. For days when air quality is a concern, but the purple flag threshold is not met, FNS recommends sponsors with outdoor sites consider the outdoor activity guidance developed by the EPA and the CDC: <https://www.airnow.gov/activity-guides-publications/>. These waivers are effective *May 1, 2024, through September 30, 2024.*

Non-Congregate Meal Service (SFSP/SSO)

Under NSLA, 42 U.S.C. 1753(b)(1)(A), 42 U.S.C. 1761(a)(1)(D), and program regulations at 7 CFR 225.6(i)(15), SFSP meals must be served in a congregate setting and must be consumed by participants on site. Please note that this waiver is not the same as the new option to provide a rural non-congregate meal service as described in Section 13(a)(13) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42 U.S.C. 1761). This waiver is not limited to sites in rural areas and may only be applied to sites approved for congregate meal service.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements to serve meals through the SFSP in a congregate setting. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. FNS also extends the parent and guardian pick up flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

Parent and Guardian Meal Pick Up (SFSP/SSO)

Under NSLA, 42 U.S.C. 1761(f)(3), and program regulations at 7 CFR 225.2 (Meals), and 7 CFR 225.9(d)(7), SFSP meals must be served to eligible children.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the requirements that meals may only be served directly to children. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. State agencies opting to use this flexibility must have a plan for ensuring that local operators are able to maintain accountability and program integrity. This includes putting in place processes to ensure that meals are distributed only to parents or guardians of eligible children, and that duplicate meals are not distributed to any child. FNS also extends the parent and guardian pick up flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

Meal Service Times (SFSP/SSO)

Under program regulations at 7 CFR 225.16(c)(1), (2), and (3), meals served in the SFSP must follow meal service time requirements.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements that set meal time parameters for SFSP sites. FNS also extends the meal service times flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

If a sponsor wishes to use this meal service times waiver, additional requirements apply. The meal service times waiver requirements are intended to ensure that summer meal sites that change the time of their meal service provide adequate notice to the community to ensure there is no loss in program access.

To use this meal service times waiver, sponsors must:

- a) Not change meal service times less than 24 hours in advance of the previously scheduled meal service time,
- b) Put up a printed notice or poster at the site indicating the change in meal service times to attendees,
- c) Alert the community through appropriate channels (such as school or neighborhood listservs), and
- d) Comply with any additional requirement(s) requested by the State agency.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) Operations During School Closures (Schools are closed with no virtual learning)

The waivers in this section apply to SFSP and SSO when school is closed due to the unanticipated causes listed in the first paragraph of this waiver. This applies when school buildings are closed during the instructional year and virtual classes are not offered. These waivers are effective *through June 30, 2024*.

For waivers in this section, TN DOE **may not** approve a waiver for a local Program operator for more than 10 consecutive operating days without approval from FNS. In situations that may warrant longer approval periods, the FNS Southeast Regional Office (SERO) will work closely with TN DOE to determine if an extension is needed.

Non-Congregate Meal Service (SFSP/SSO)

Under NSLA, 42 U.S.C. 1753(b)(1)(A), 42 U.S.C. 1761(a)(1)(D), and program regulations at 7 CFR 225.6(i)(15), SFSP meals must be served in a congregate setting and must be consumed by participants on site.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements to serve meals through the SFSP in a congregate setting. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. Area eligibility requirements still apply with this waiver. FNS also extends the non-congregate meal service flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

Parent and Guardian Meal Pick-Up (SFSP/SSO)

Under the NSLA, 42 U.S.C. 1761(f)(3), and program regulations at 7 CFR 225.2 (Meals), and 7 CFR 225.9(d)(7), SFSP meals must be served to eligible children.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements that meals may only be served directly to children. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. FNS also extends the parent and guardian pick up flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

Meal Service Times (SFSP/SSO)

Under program regulations at 7 CFR 225.16(c)(1), (2), and (3), meals served in the SFSP must follow meal service time requirements.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements that set meal time parameters for SFSP sites. Any other requirements referenced in these provisions remain in effect. FNS also extends the meal service times flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

Service of Meals at School Sites during Unanticipated School Closures (SFSP/SSO)

Under the NSLA, 42 U.S.C. 1761(c)(1) and program regulations at 7 CFR 225.6(h)(1)(iv), State agencies may approve meal service operations only at non-school sites during unanticipated school closures.

Pursuant to the waiver authority granted at Section 12(l) of the NSLA, when school is unexpectedly closed, FNS waives the aforementioned requirements that limit the operation of SFSP to non-school sites. School sites may only serve meals during unanticipated school closures if doing so does not present a safety concern. FNS also extends the service of meals at school sites during unanticipated school closures flexibility to SSO for the duration of this waiver.

The waiver authority at Section 12(l) of the NSLA requires FNS to review the performance of any State or eligible service provider that was granted a waiver. Therefore, by December 31, 2024, TN DOE must provide to the FNS SERO a report quantifying the impact of the waiver, as described below. The report must include the following:

- A description of how the waiver impacted meal service operations at participating sites;
- A description of whether the waiver resulted in improved services to children;
- A description of how the waiver reduced the quantity of paperwork necessary to administer the Program; and
- A summary of benefits and challenges associated with the waiver.

In addition, FNS may request information on the use of the waiver on a more frequent basis. FNS appreciates TN DOE's commitment to work with sponsors to find efficiencies that balance the needs of local communities with cost-effective program management and integrity. If you have questions, please contact the Southeast Regional Office.

Sincerely,

(for) J. Kevin Maskornick
Director
Community Meals Policy Division