



Asthma and Allergy
Foundation of America

April 10, 2023

Cindy Long, MPA
Administrator, Food and Nutrition Services
United States Department of Agriculture
3101 Park Center Dr # 906
Alexandria, VA 22302

Re: Docket No. FNS–2022–0043; Child Nutrition Programs: Revisions to Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (RIN 0584–AE88)

Dear Administrator Long:

On behalf of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA), thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the USDA’s proposed revisions to Meal Patterns in the Child Nutrition Programs.

We are writing to bring to your attention several concerns related to the health and safety of children with food allergies who participate in these programs. This population, unfortunately, is large: approximately one in ten children in the U.S. has a food allergy.¹ Exposure to food allergens can lead to a severe reaction called anaphylaxis; in rare cases, anaphylaxis results in death.

AAFA strongly supports existing child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program. These programs provide nutritious meals to children, addressing hunger, promoting health, and mitigating racial and ethnic disparities in nutrition. Overall, AAFA supports USDA’s proposed steps to better align the nutrition standards for these programs with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025*.

¹ Gupta R, Warren C, Blumenstock J, Kotowska J, Mittal K, Smith B. The prevalence of childhood food allergy in the United States: An update. *Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol* (2017).



Child nutrition programs are required by law to accommodate food allergies and provide safe and nutritious food alternatives for children who are allergic to the meals offered.²

We would like to encourage USDA to take the following steps to increase the attention and resources paid to food allergy accommodations to ensure that children do not experience potentially dangerous reactions at school:

1. Assess whether schools need additional funding to allow them to effectively meet the needs of students with food allergies. A 2019 survey of child nutrition program menu planners in California found that most perceived accommodating food allergies as expensive, due to higher food and labor costs.³ This isn't surprising to AAFA, as we hear from the families in our patient community that food allergies lead to significantly higher food costs.⁴ USDA should initiate a survey or study to determine whether costs are affecting programs' ability to consistently accommodate food allergies.
2. Assess if allergy prevention standards are being met consistently across programs and seasons. We have seen reporting of summer nutrition programs not meeting the allergy accommodation standards as

² USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "Accommodating Children with Disabilities in the School Meal Programs: Guidance for School Food Service Professionals" (2017). Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/2017-edition-accommodating-children-disabilities-school-meal-programs>

³ Grumbles, Lynnelle; Strohbehn, Catherine. Child Nutrition Program Menu Planners' Perceptions of Costs Associated with Meals for Children with Food Allergies in California Schools. *Journal of Child Nutrition & Management*, v43 n2 Fall 2019. Available at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1233677>

⁴ Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, "My Life with Food Allergies: Parent Survey Report" (2019). Available at <https://kidswithfoodallergies.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/aafa-my-life-with-food-allergy-parent-survey-report.pdf>



consistently as school nutrition programs.⁵ In the survey or study requested above or in a separate study, USDA should investigate whether summer programs have the resources and training to provide safe food for children and families with food allergies.

3. Increase the public's awareness and understanding of a child's right to accommodation in child nutrition programs. If a child nutrition program does not adequately accommodate a participant's allergy, the family may submit a grievance, and has the right to a number of accommodations in the process.⁶ However, at AAFA, we hear frequently from families who are unaware of their rights and how to seek enforcement. We also hear that families are hesitant to ask for accommodations because they do not trust that school personnel are equipped to manage food allergies. We urge USDA to create a clear and accessible website with information and resources for families managing food allergies (or other disabilities requiring accommodation in child nutrition programs).

4. Strengthen food allergy training for all food service personnel working in child nutrition programs. Training for the prevention, recognition, and treatment of allergic reactions is critical for all persons who care for children. In fact, it is one of the nine core policy standards in AAFA's [*Child Care Policies for Food Allergy: Elijah's Law Report for U.S. States and*](#)

⁵ Jen Jobrack, "Holes in the Safety Net for Food Allergy Families." *Allergic Living* (June 26, 2020). Available at <https://www.allergicliving.com/2020/06/26/holes-in-the-safety-net-for-food-allergy-families/>

⁶ USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "Accommodating Children with Disabilities in the School Meal Programs: Guidance for School Food Service Professionals" (2017). Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/2017-edition-accommodating-children-disabilities-school-meal-programs>



Territories.⁷ Currently, USDA offers food allergy prevention and response training for local school lunch and breakfast program personnel.⁸ However, this training is not mandatory. AAFA strongly supports S.121, the Protecting Children with Food Allergies Act which would make the training mandatory for staff in these programs.⁹ The bill would also make training available to staff in other child nutrition programs, and add allergy information into materials for WIC participants. As AAFA advocates for passage of the bill, we urge USDA to maximize the reach and uptake of its current training opportunities to ensure that child nutrition program personnel are best prepared to prevent, and if needed, respond to food allergies.

5. Support flexibility in the fluid milk substitution process to accommodate food allergies and intolerance. As USDA notes, current federal statute requires a lengthy process for substitutions for dairy milk. Milk is one of the most common food allergies among children, and we urge USDA to optimize flexibility for schools to accommodate children with milk allergy, as well as those with lactose intolerance.

Thank you very much for your time and attention. Child nutrition programs are a crucial structural tool for promoting nutrition and equity, and we appreciate the opportunity to weigh in on how they can best serve children with food allergies. If you

⁷ Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, “Child Care Policies for Food Allergy: Elijah’s Law Report for U.S. States and Territories” (2022). Available at <https://aafa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/child-care-policies-for-food-allergy-elijahs-law-report.pdf>

⁸ Institute of Child Nutrition, “Food Safety Resources.” Available at <https://theicn.org/icn-resources-a-z/food-safety>. ICN works with USDA to develop a range of training materials on allergy and other food safety issues.

⁹ S.121 – Protecting Children with Food Allergies Act. 118th Congress. Available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/121/text?s=1&r=1&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22food+allergies%22%5D%7D>



Asthma and Allergy
Foundation of America

would like any additional information from AAFA, please contact Jenna Riemenschneider at jennar@aafa.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Kenneth Mendez'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kenneth Mendez
President and Chief Executive Officer
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America