



**D.C. Hunger Solutions**

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

## **District of Columbia Early Childhood Nutrition Report:**

# **The Impact of Participation in Federal Nutrition Programs**

April 2024 ■ [www.dchunger.org](http://www.dchunger.org)



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### About D.C. Hunger Solutions

D.C. Hunger Solutions, founded in 2002 as an initiative of the Food Research & Action Center, seeks to create a hunger-free community and improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income residents in the District of Columbia. To learn more about D.C. Hunger Solutions, visit [www.dchunger.org](http://www.dchunger.org).

April 2024

# Executive Summary

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**F**ood insecurity is on the rise in the U.S., where 12.8 percent of households experienced food insecurity in 2022, compared to 10.2 percent in 2021.<sup>1</sup> In the District of Columbia, specifically, 10 percent of residents are experiencing food insecurity. Food insecurity can be driven by multiple socioeconomic factors,<sup>2</sup> which lead to a lack of access to food resources,<sup>3</sup> and can have detrimental long-term impacts on one's health and well-being. While proper nutrition is important at any stage in life, high-quality nutrition is especially critical for a child's healthy development and growth. Early childhood (primarily 0–5 years old for this report) is a crucial period of one's development, and the various exposures children have during this time form the base of a child's growth trajectory.<sup>4</sup> According to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap, 14 percent of children in the District of Columbia are identified as food insecure.

Studies have found that food insecurity in early childhood is associated with developmental concerns,<sup>5</sup> increased risk of adolescent mental health challenges,<sup>6</sup> increased body mass index,<sup>7</sup> increased dental caries,<sup>8</sup> behavioral and academic challenges,<sup>9</sup> and poor health.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in recent data reported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on food insecurity in 2022, households with children under 6 years old saw a statistically significant increase in food insecurity in comparison to 2021, at 16.7 percent compared to 12.9 percent, respectively.<sup>11</sup> While children in these households may be protected from food insecurity when possible, the USDA found that 8.6 percent of households with children under 6 years old had children experiencing food insecurity as well. With this growing

challenge in the U.S., it remains a priority that children have continuous access to nutritious foods throughout the year.

While food insecurity among young children continues to improve in the District of Columbia, the variety of local and federal nutrition programs, such as Healthy Tots, universal school meals, and Summer Food Service Program (locally known as DC Youth Meals Program), serves as critical resources ensuring children continue to receive access to healthy and nutritious foods. Increasing funding and breaking down administrative and other barriers to participation in federal nutrition programs, such as WIC and CACFP, vital resources for District families, will be key to combating food insecurity among the “littlest eaters” in the nation's capital.

## About This Report

D.C. Hunger Solutions (DCHS) produced this report to provide an overview of early childhood nutrition and related programs in Washington, D.C., with the goal of identifying areas for policy improvement to maximize nutritional benefits for children.

This report provides an assessment of participation data in various programs, along with recommendations for improving reach. Data included in this report was obtained through District of Columbia state agencies, Child Care Aware, and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Child Nutrition Tables. Early Childhood Community Roundtable Discussions held among families and community partners in the District contributed to background preparation for this report and formulating recommendations.

## Early Childhood

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**A**ccording to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the first five years of a child's life impacts long-term social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development.<sup>12</sup> Addressing these factors during early childhood has the potential to have lasting positive impacts on a child's mental and physical health.

Furthermore, when assessing the contributing factors associated with early childhood development, the social determinants of health — economic stability, access to high-quality education, social, and community supports, etc. — create an opportunity to better understand how to adequately address the health and well-being of children in their early years.

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In the District of Columbia, the Birth-to-Three for All DC Act of 2018 was enacted to create a comprehensive framework for supporting children birth to age 3. The bill established new programs such as the HealthySteps Pediatric Primary Care Demonstration, Help Me Grow Expansion and Evaluation, Home Visitation Evaluation, and Lactation Certification Preparatory Program, in addition to providing subsidies for early child care for all families in the District.<sup>13</sup>

When addressing early childhood well-being and development, it is equally important to discuss the importance of nutrition in the lives of children birth to age 5. Early childhood nutrition focuses on infants and young children receiving the proper nutrients they need to thrive and for their healthy development. Nutritional intake comes in various forms, for example, babies in their earlier months of life receiving their nutrients from breast milk and/or infant formula, and through diverse food options once babies, toddlers, and young children are eating solid foods.<sup>14</sup> While a child's appetite may vary, offering them diverse and healthy options that include the nutrients they need, such as (but not limited to) foods with calcium,

fiber, and proteins, can help them attain a nutritious diet.<sup>15</sup> In addition to healthy foods, it is helpful to reduce the number of sugary foods and drinks children consume as it can lead to poor nutritional intake and challenging feeding practices.<sup>16</sup>

## What Is Early Childhood Nutrition?

According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, early care and education aids young children in developing healthy eating habits. Early childhood nutrition ensures children starting at infancy have the healthiest start possible through breastfeeding support, consumption of nutrient dense foods, and responsive feeding practices.<sup>17</sup>

At the age of 6 months, children need to begin eating their first foods. Young children should be fed frequently and in adequate quantities throughout the day, and their meals must be nutrient-dense and comprised of a variety of food groups.

## Early Childhood Nutrition Programs

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Over the decades, federal and state programs have worked to support children and families with accessing nutritious foods. Federal programs, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), promote healthy eating through efforts such as nutrition education, and providing financial support for nutritious food options, and referrals to health and social supports.<sup>18</sup>

### WIC

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children is a federal program that operates through local state agencies, community-based organizations, and health departments across the U.S. and five territories. The program serves pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and

children (up to 5 years old) who are from households with low incomes and at nutritional risk.

In the District of Columbia, the D.C. Department of Health, which administers **D.C. WIC**, provides a series of supports to families in need,<sup>19</sup> including:

- health and social service referrals;
- breastfeeding supports and aids, such as breastfeeding classes and referrals to lactations consultants;
- financial benefits to purchase fresh produce from authorized farmers' markets through the **Electronic Farmers Market Nutrition Program** (eFMNP);
- produce home delivery in partnership with **Dreaming Out Loud Grocery**;
- health resources for families, which include information related to health during pregnancy, postpartum, childhood safety, and healthy approaches to food and nutrition; and

- community events in partnership with D.C. WIC or that generally promote the health and wellness of participating families.

## CACFP

The Child and Adult Care Food Program is a federal program that gives financial reimbursements to child care and adult daycare sites when they provide nutritious foods (within designated federal guidelines) to children and adults who meet eligibility criteria. According to the USDA FNS, over 4 million children benefit from CACFP daily.<sup>20</sup> These sites are a significant modality in which children can access food and exemplify how public policy has an intervening capacity to influence childhood health and well-being.

In D.C., the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) provides direct oversight to program providers through technical assistance and training opportunities, as well as grantors of the Healthy Tots Wellness Grant, which provides funding for wellness programming and services to community-based child care facilities focusing on physical activities, Farm to Early Care and Education (as well as local procurement), outdoor learning/ environmental education, and staff wellness and culture.

## Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program

Understanding the importance of local procurement in child nutrition programs, USDA established the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program. Farm to School focuses on access to more local foods in schools, early child care, and summer food programs for children.<sup>21</sup> The program provides grants and technical assistance, and conducts research that supports the incorporation of local foods in school-based meals.<sup>22</sup> It also encourages nutrition education activities, such as cooking classes and gardening, and incorporating nutrition and community food system education in school curriculums.<sup>23</sup>

## Farm to Early Care and Education

With the goal of supporting the “littlest eaters,” Farm to Early Care and Education (Farm to ECE) aims to improve the health, nutrition, and wellness in early childhood

through increased access to local foods, hands-on gardening activities, and tailored nutrition education and food-based learning activities.

## National Farm to School Network and Farm to Early Care and Education

The National Farm to School Network (NFSN) engages in activities focused on child development, engaging communities, and increasing Farm to ECE quality. The work of NFSN brought together a Farm to Early Care and Education Working Group, which helped to inform the national Farm to ECE future strategies. The vision includes initiatives related to:

- racial equity and justice
- ECE environments
- food systems
- ECE professional development
- collaboration and community engagement

Focusing on the ECE environments, the vision includes that all ECE environments would have access to healthy, local foods, gardening activities, and increased education around nutrition and agriculture.<sup>24</sup> These efforts can help improve children’s diets, aid ECE providers in meeting CACFP standards, and can improve community engagement and support of local agricultural services.<sup>25</sup>

The District of Columbia continues to increase access to and awareness of the important role Farm to Early Care and Education plays in early childhood nutrition. In June 2023, OSSE, FRESHFARM, and DC Food Policy Council developed the Farm to Early Care and Education Roadmap to connect young children and their families to local food and local food producers by purchasing and serving local food and offering food, farm, and nutrition-related educational opportunities in ECE settings.<sup>26</sup> A Farm to ECE Roadmap Coalition was established, including D.C. Hunger Solutions, DC Health, and DC Association for Education of the Young Child and UDC SNAP-Ed, to implement root-cause analysis brainstorming sessions to create the framework for the roadmap that includes barriers, tactics, and strategies.<sup>27</sup>

# Participation in Early Childhood Nutrition Programs in D.C.

■ **Research shows untapped potential for CACFP participation.** CACFP data from the USDA FNS reports that in fiscal year (FY) 2022, the average daily attendance in D.C. was 37,516 participants with over 13.4 million meals served.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, data from Child Care Aware of America and the District of Columbia Division of Health & Wellness dashboard reported that there were 488 child care programs in D.C. in 2022 with only 33 percent participating in CACFP.<sup>29</sup> Data from the dashboard also assessed poverty data across the District, overlaid it with the number of child care providers, and found that there continues to be areas of potential CACFP eligibility, highlighting a need to increase participation in the program.

■ **Overall meals served in CACFP increased from FY 2021 to FY 2022.** Due to COVID-19 restrictions that may have impacted accessibility to early child care, the number of meals served in CACFP drastically increased. In FY 2021, child care providers served an estimated 2.5 million meals compared to 13.4 million meals in FY 2022 and 3.6 million in FY 2023. Furthermore, Appendix A shows that in both fiscal years, more meals were served at child care centers, compared to participating daycare homes, according to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.



■ **WIC participation has increased in the District.** USDA has assessed WIC coverage rates across the U.S., finding an overall coverage rate of 59.4 percent in D.C. in 2021, which is a slight increase from the 2020 coverage rate of 57.9 percent.<sup>30</sup> When looking at the subgroups of eligible individuals, there was a 90.3 percent coverage rate in D.C. for infants, and a 49 percent coverage rate for children. While the infant coverage rate decreased compared to 2020 when coverage was 100 percent, the WIC coverage rate for children has increased from the 2020 rate of 38.7 percent.<sup>31</sup>

In reviewing more recent estimates, preliminary D.C. WIC data shows that, in August 2023, 86 percent of those enrolled were participating in the program. Additionally, of those participating, approximately 27 percent were infants, and 49 percent were children. Comparing data from previous years shows that while WIC coverage rates are improving in areas, there remains a need to increase coverage rates, as well as focusing efforts on improving participation among those enrolled.

Additionally, according to USDA WIC Annual State Level Participation Data, for FY 2023, the District had a total participation rate of over 11,000.<sup>32</sup>

However, WIC participation experienced a decline in participation when compared to FY 2022. The decline in participation could be attributed to the expiration of pandemic-era program flexibilities and nutrition programs returning to normal operations.

■ **Further investments are needed to restrengthen Farm to Early Care and Education Programs.** According to the *OSSE Healthy Schools Act 2022 Report*, pre-K students engaged in garden-based learning activities decreased from 3,123 students during school year 2019–2020 down to 2,126 students during school year 2020–2021.<sup>33</sup> While it is possible decreases can be attributed to the limited classroom participation due to the impacts of virtual learning during the pandemic, future investments will aid in restoring engagement in garden-based Farm to Early Care and Education Learning activities.

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## Recommendations for Improving Early Childhood Nutrition

Participation in federal nutrition programs like CACFP and WIC are two of the many ways in which children birth to age 5 and their families can be supported.

- **Increase full funding for WIC Expansion Act:** While WIC is an important avenue to support families accessing nutritious food options, accessing healthy food can still be an issue due to structural barriers. To address one barrier, the [WIC Expansion Act](#) was enacted in 2019 in D.C. to reduce restrictions on WIC vendors to increase participation among smaller stores.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, it requires the assembly of a WIC outreach advisory board to develop plans for improving WIC participation in the District.
- **Increase funding to support additional authorized WIC vendors and staff:** D.C. WIC's transition from a paper system to an electronic WIC (eWIC) system in 2022 streamlined the processes for internal information management and enrollment, and improved the way participant benefits are received and stores are reimbursed.<sup>35</sup> However, increasing the number of authorized WIC vendors in the District will require additional employees to ensure program integrity, provide technical assistance and support, and conduct federally required on-site inspections, compliance buys, invoice audits, and recipient investigations. Two full-time



equivalent positions designated in the WIC Expansion Act would support ongoing program improvements and delivery of services.

Additionally, through a series of community roundtable discussions aimed at better understanding access to early childhood nutrition resources, WIC participants shared the need for ongoing support when purchasing WIC-approved items from various grocery store staff in the District. Participants expressed that staff who are unaware of the foods on the WIC-approved list and stores without updated or proper signage can make it challenging for participants to purchase what they need. In order to support staff and ongoing efficient operations, additional funding through WIC Expansion Act is needed.

- **Improvements to WIC food packaging:** WIC serves as an important link to food resources for many children and families. WIC participants across the District have expressed challenges with access to food. Additional feedback from roundtable discussions with participants has found WIC participants would benefit in having increased spending flexibility and being able to tailor WIC food packages around individual and family needs. As such, in 2022, USDA FNS introduced proposed [revisions](#) to the WIC food package. These revisions will seek to modernize WIC by supporting the increased value of WIC's fruit and vegetable benefit, allowing additional flexibility in food package sizes, increasing accessibility to culturally relevant food options, and fastening alignment with the 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.<sup>36</sup> As of June 17, 2024, USDA will make effective the final rule revising the WIC Food Package. These revisions will improve the nutritional quality of the foods offered, making WIC more participant-centered, and increasing the value of the food package.
- **Increase funding for the Healthy Tots Act:** In addition to CACFP, the Healthy Tots Act is legislation that was passed in 2014 in D.C. to provide additional funding to child care facilities that are participating in CACFP. Through the Healthy Tots Act, eligible child care centers and daycare homes can receive funding for a third meal (in comparison to the two meals and

snacks covered under CACFP), are encouraged to follow additional nutrition standards and use more local foods, and can apply for grants to support additional nutrition and physical activity programs.<sup>37</sup> Funding in support of Healthy Tots Act also acts to establish direct support lines and technical assistance to decrease the administrative burden for CACFP operations that could increase participation and further integrate nutritious meals and snacks served at early child care sites. Additionally, bringing together CACFP administrative services and assistance in one location as a shared service model of sorts could be an opportunity to reduce burden and to streamline communication, increase participation, and strengthen the link to nutritional meals for children at such a crucial time in their development.

■ **Passage of the Early Childhood Nutrition**

**Improvement Act:** The Early Childhood Nutrition Improvement Act, introduced by Reps. Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR) and Marcus Molinaro (R-NY), aims to allow an additional meal or snack for children in a full day of care, which improves the adequacy of benefits.<sup>38</sup> The legislation also makes the CACFP payment rate-setting fairer by calculating family child care payments the same as child care center payments, streamlines participation for parents and providers by moving to annual eligibility for proprietary child care centers, and makes improvements to the serious deficiency process, and establishes an Advisory Committee on CACFP paperwork.

■ **Fully fund Early Child Pay Equity Fund:** The [Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund](#) was passed through D.C. legislation in 2021, aimed at increasing compensation for early childhood educators.<sup>39</sup> Early childhood educators have historically been underfunded, and D.C.'s pay equity fund provides an opportunity to improve the lives of educators and quality of early childhood programming. A recent report by the Bainum Family Foundation [assessing child care access](#) in D.C. found that the supply and demand gap for early childhood education programs was reduced in 2023 compared to 2018. However, young children (ages 0–2) are underserved among early child care programs compared to children ages 3–4 years old



who have a slight surplus in seats available in programs. There are various factors that contribute to changes in both supply and demand of child care programming in D.C.; however, barriers to accessing programs persist. Prioritizing early childhood educators in upcoming budget discussions is necessary for securing funding grants, increasing fair compensation and programming, and improving early childhood education.

Additionally, expanding on the scope of support for pay equity in early childhood education, there is a need to consider how D.C. can fund early childhood education programs overall. As D.C. provided COVID-19 pandemic relief funds during the pandemic, continued funding to help support administrative needs, resources, and workforce support can further aid in improving the early childhood programming landscape in D.C.

■ **Fully fund District of Columbia Child Tax Credit Bill:** The [District Child Tax Credit Amendment Act of 2023](#) was introduced in March 2023 by Councilmember Zachary Parker in response to the need for greater assistance for the care of children. With the goal of significantly reducing the District's child poverty rates, this bill would ensure qualifying individuals earning less

than \$120,000 will receive \$500 for each child (up to three children) via a child tax credit and joint filers earning up to \$175,000 together can receive the credit.<sup>40</sup>

- **Increase funding to support local food programs:** Supporting local food programs has a multitude of benefits. For early childhood, it increases access to healthy food that is procured locally. It also increases children’s education on food, nutrition, and agriculture through hands-on experiences. These experiences give children more of an opportunity to try a variety of fruits and vegetables and to spend time outdoors, which ultimately plays a role in leading to healthier outcomes. Farm to early care programs also support local farmers and build a stronger sense of community through education and gardening events and experiences.

## Additional Recommendations

As there is much work to continue to expand, support, and improve, there are a few additional recommendations to consider for future efforts:

- **Centering and addressing the root causes and structural determinants that lead to food insecurity:** Food assistance programs are necessary but will not completely address or eliminate food insecurity in the District. Continuing research efforts, such as conducting needs assessments, landscape analyses, and environmental scans, can help to narrow in on where



gaps exist in D.C. For example, the Food Access by Public Transit Study Amendment Act of 2023 proposes requiring the District Department of Transportation to conduct studies assessing transportation access to supermarkets in areas in the District with limited access to food.<sup>41</sup> This effort considers assessing areas that impact social determinants of health in an effort to address and reduce food access challenges in the District. Additionally, supporting efforts that engage in community-based participatory research during policy development can help to center the voice of those living through these challenges. Lastly, addressing the root causes and structural determinants of food insecurity can yield a multitude of individual and societal benefits down the line.

- **Improving data sharing across state agencies:** Data sharing mechanisms across agencies may reduce administrative burdens for participants and agency staff by increasing communication and establishing more efficient workflows.

## Conclusion

Nutrition in early childhood can impact growth, development, and long-term health outcomes. Early childhood is also a time when one develops eating habits that can be carried throughout one’s lifetime. The diversity of nutrition assistance approaches in D.C. aims to address food insecurity through financial assistance, technical assistance, and programmatic and community-level resources. These opportunities are helping to establish the nutritional and health foundation for children across the District, but there is a continued need to assess barriers to participation, reach, and community needs. Data shows there is a need to increase WIC participation and early child care site participation in CACFP, which can be tackled through multiple avenues. Continued evaluation of food assistance programs in D.C. can help to highlight successes and identify gaps and barriers to participation, along with opportunities for future improvement through increased funding for existing programs and new efforts focused on research, community engagement, and data sharing.

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## Technical Notes

Data for this report was obtained through the USDA FNS program reports and their Child Nutrition Tables for WIC, CACFP, and Summer Food Service Program data. The D.C. WIC agency provided WIC data in percentages.

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## Appendix

**Table A:** Total Number of Meals Served in Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) FY 2021–2022 for Child Care Center Providers and Day Care Home Providers

	Child Care Centers	Day Care Homes
Total Breakfasts served	59,378	2,520
Total Lunches served	59,470	2,471
Total Snacks served	60,224	2,436
Total Suppers served	3,370	50
<b>Total Meals Served</b>	<b>182,442</b>	<b>7,477</b>

**Table B:** Total Number of Meals Served in Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) FY 2022–2023 for Child Care Center Providers and Day Care Home Providers

	Child Care Centers	Day Care Homes
Total Breakfasts served	59,378	2,520
Total Lunches served	534,501	23,028
Total Snacks served	560,804	22,338
Total Suppers served	44,623	377
<b>Total Meals Served</b>	<b>1,651,211</b>	<b>69,278</b>

# Endnotes

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