United States Department of Agriculture

Food and Nutrition Service

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Alexandria, VA
22302-1500

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SUBJECT: Eligibility Effective Date for Directly Certified Students

TO: Regional Directors
Special Nutrition Programs
All Regions

State Directors
Child Nutrition Programs
All States

This memorandum addresses inquiries regarding flexibility in determining the effective date of eligibility for students who are directly certified to receive free meals or free milk in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Special Milk Program (SMP). The following clarifications are consistent with the flexibility provided for determining the effective date of eligibility for applications in policy memorandum SP 11-2014, *Effective Date of Free or Reduced Price Meal Eligibility Determinations* (December 3, 2013).

As defined in the Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) under 7 CFR 245.2, direct certification means determining a child is eligible for free meals or free milk, as applicable, based on documentation obtained directly from the appropriate State or local agency or individuals authorized to certify that the child is:

- a member of a household receiving assistance under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program; or
- a foster child, homeless child, migrant child, Head Start or Even Start child or runaway child.

Methods of direct certification include automated data matching, the letter method, and lists or other forms of documentation provided to the school or local educational agency (LEA) directly from the appropriate State or local agency administering the assistance program. The following information addresses the flexibility for determining the eligibility effective date <u>under all methods</u> used to directly certify students for free meal or milk benefits and applies only to the school meal programs.

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Automated Data Matching Method

Automated data matching is the most common method used to directly certify students who are members of Assistance Program households (i.e., SNAP, TANF, or FDPIR) or in foster care. LEAs may consider the effective date of eligibility for free school meal or milk benefits to be the date of the automated data matching file (or benefit recipient file from another agency) which first identifies the student as eligible for direct certification, rather than the date the LEA accesses and processes the automated data matching file into their local point of service (POS) system. To be used for this purpose, the data file must have been generated and received by the LEA in the current school year. Please see the scenarios in the attached guidance for further explanation of the automated data matching methods. **NOTE:** Automated data matching is the **only** method of direct certification acceptable for SNAP.

Letter Method and Lists or Other Forms of Documentation

The letter method and lists or other forms of documentation may be used to directly certify students as members of TANF and FDPIR households, as well as Other Source Categorically Eligible Programs (i.e., foster child, homeless child, migrant child, Head Start or Even Start child and runaway child). LEAs may consider the effective date of eligibility for free school meal or milk benefits to be the date the household or appropriate State or local agency submitted the letter, list or other form of documentation to the LEA, rather than the date the school official approves the documentation. Although the letter method is not a form of direct certification for SNAP, a letter from the appropriate SNAP agency can be used in lieu of an application to establish a child's categorical eligibility. Therefore, the flexibility in determining the effective date of eligibility also applies to the letter method of documentation from SNAP. Please see the scenarios in the attached guidance for further explanation of the letter method and lists or other forms of documentation for direct certification.

IMPLEMENTATION

If the LEA elects to exercise the flexibility described in this memorandum, the LEA must:

- Do so consistently for all the direct certification methods described herein (i.e., automated data matching, letter method, and lists or other forms of documentation);
- Apply the direct certification eligibility effective date flexibility consistently to all students directly certified across all participating schools and school meal programs within the LEA;
- Document the effective date used, such as a date stamp, to document the date lists or letters from other agencies were received, or the documented and traceable run date of automated match files or recipient benefit files from another appropriate agency;
- If categorical eligibility is based on SNAP, TANF or FDPIR, the extended eligibility provision in 7 CFR 245.6(b)(7) also applies;

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- Refund any money paid by or on behalf of the student for reimbursable meals or milk during the period from the free meal eligibility effective date (as established through the methods described in this memorandum) through the date the direct certification is actually implemented at the local school, including forgiving accrued debt, for any meals or milk adjusted to free due to the change in effective date. **The LEA can only claim those meals or milk at the free reimbursement rate if the student is given a refund or the debt is discharged**; and
- Notify their State agency. State agencies must work with the LEAs to ensure the proper implementation of the flexibility and the accuracy of the LEA's adjusted claims, as applicable.

LEAs electing to use this flexibility must follow the State agency procedures and timelines for adjusting claims after initial submission. **FNS encourages LEAs that choose to use this flexibility to resolve and implement direct certification matches as early as possible upon receipt of appropriate documentation.** This will help to ensure that eligible children receive free benefits as early as possible and that adjusted claims are submitted accurately during claim submission timeframes.

For further information, please reference the attached guidance and the *Eligibility Manual for School Meals* to be issued in 2014.

State agencies are reminded to distribute this memorandum to Program operators immediately. LEAs should contact their State agencies for additional information. State agencies may direct any questions concerning this guidance to the appropriate Food and Nutrition Service Regional Office.

Original Signed

Cynthia Long
Deputy Administrator
Child Nutrition Programs

Attachment

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ATTACHMENT

Direct Certification Methods and Effective Date of Eligibility Scenarios

If the LEA elects to exercise the flexibility for determining the eligibility effective date for directly certified students, the LEA must do so for all direct certification methods described below – Automated Data Matching, Letter Method, and Lists or Other Forms of Documentation. Therefore, to establish the eligibility date of students directly certified as the date the information was provided to the LEA, the LEA must ***either*** follow all the methods described below consistently for all affected students, as applicable, ***or*** use the date the direct certification information was processed at the LEA or school (i.e., the date data is entered into the point of service (POS) system) to implement the student's direct certification.

AUTOMATED DATA MATCHING

While automated data matching is the most common method of direct certification, the processes vary from State to State and the effective dates may vary depending on the matching process used. The scenarios listed below for State/Central-level and LEA/Local-level matching are intended to illustrate the most common process flows for direct certification data matching and identify the flexibility available to LEAs in determining the effective date of eligibility for directly certified students.

Effective Date of Eligibility:
LEAs have flexibility to consider the effective date of eligibility for free school meal benefits to be the date the student's record first appeared on the automated data matching file, ***generated in the current school year***, identifying the student as eligible to be directly certified. This applies to students identified via solid matches (i.e., clear matches where further research is not needed to resolve), as well as students identified as "possible matches" (often referred to as "probable matches") or "unmatched" when the record is later resolved to be a student enrolled in a school participating in the NSLP, SBP, or SMP. The effective date used must be clearly documented, such as a traceable run date of automated match files or recipient benefit files from another appropriate agency (this includes documentation for students who are extended eligibility because they are members of the same household as a student identified as receiving SNAP, TANF or FDPIR benefits).

1. **State/Central-level matching:** In States where direct certification matching is conducted at the NSLP State agency level, LEAs may use the date of the State match results data file/report containing the student's record as the effective date of the matched student's eligibility for free school meals or milk. This file date would be applicable even when the student's record is discovered on the file/report later in the same school year as part of the resolution process for possible matches or unmatched records on the file.

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For example:

The NSLP State agency conducts an automated match between the SNAP/TANF statewide benefit recipient files and the most current statewide student enrollment file. Through a secure system, the NSLP State agency uploads the resulting "match file" to a website where LEAs can access the files for the students enrolled in their schools. The match file is dated September 4 and is divided by "accepted" matches that can be loaded directly into the school POS systems, "possible" matches that require manual intervention to resolve, and "unmatched" records of students who are receiving SNAP benefits but do not match with any student record on the school enrollment file.

On September 12, the LEA determines that a student enrolled in one of its schools is on the September 4 "possible match" list due to an error in the spelling of the child's last name. The LEA resolves the error and directly certifies the student, establishing **September 4** as the effective date of the student's eligibility for free meals. The student paid full price lunch at $3.00 per meal totaling $12.00 for four reimbursable lunches between September 4 and September 11. The LEA refunds the $12.00 to the student and adjusts their meal claim according to their State agency's policies to reflect the reimbursable meals at the free rate. The LEA also ensures the September 4 match file date is clearly documented to show justification for the change of the student's eligibility date.

2. **Local/LEA-level matching:** In most States where direct certification matching is conducted at the LEA level, the NSLP State agency obtains benefit recipient files directly from the appropriate State or local agency and provides these files through a variety of methods to the LEA. The LEA then conducts matching between these benefit recipient files and the LEA's student enrollment records to identify students eligible to be directly certified for free school meals or milk. For students identified through this local matching process as eligible to be directly certified, LEAs may elect to use the date of the benefit recipient files provided by the NSLP State agency as the effective date of the matched student's eligibility for free school meals or milk.

For example:

The NSLP State agency receives a monthly recipient benefit file from the State SNAP/TANF agency dated September 14 and, on the same date, uploads the file to a secure website where LEAs can access the records for the students enrolled in their schools. On September 18, an LEA runs a data match at the local level to compare its student enrollment records to the SNAP/TANF recipient file.

On October 2, the LEA discovers that one of its students is on the September 18 "unmatched" list due to a data entry error in the school enrollment record. The record is corrected and the student is identified as eligible for direct certification. The LEA directly certifies the student on October 2, but establishes **September 14** as the effective date of the student's eligibility for free meals since this is the date of the first data file that identified the student as eligible to be directly certified. The student paid full price for 12

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reimbursable lunches ($3.00 per meal) and 10 reimbursable breakfast meals ($2.00 per meal) between September 14 and October 2, so the LEA reimburses $56.00 to the student and adjusts their meal claims according to their State agency's policies to reflect the 12 reimbursable lunches and 10 reimbursable breakfasts at the free rate. The LEA also ensures the September 14 match file date is clearly documented to show justification for the change of the student's eligibility date.

3. **Other:** Where processes vary from the above scenarios, LEAs may work with their NSLP State agency to determine the most accurate date to reflect the eligibility effective date for directly certified students. However, the selected date must be clearly documented and cannot be earlier than the date of the first data file received or made available to the LEA, in the current school year, that contains documentation from the appropriate State or local agency that the student is eligible to be directly certified.

LETTER METHOD

Another method of identifying students eligible for direct certification is the use of letters to eligible households from appropriate State or local agencies establishing a student's categorical eligibility (see 7 CFR 245.6(b)). Generally, such letters are provided directly to households and the households then provide them to the LEA or school to document their children's categorical eligibility. Such letters may be used as documentation for TANF and FDPIR Assistance Programs, or for Other Source Categorically Eligible (i.e., foster child, homeless child, migrant child, Head Start child and runaway child), ***but are not acceptable documentation for direct certification based on receipt of SNAP benefits.***

Effective Date of Eligibility:
At the LEA's discretion, the effective date of eligibility may be the date the letter from TANF, FDPIR, or appropriate State or local agencies establishing Other Source Categorically Eligible, as appropriate, is submitted by the household to the LEA or school as the effective date of eligibility, rather than the date the school official processed the direct certification based on receipt of the letter. The effective date used must be clearly documented, such as a date stamp (or electronic date, if received electronically) to document the date the LEA received the letter.

NOTE: Although the letter method is not an allowable method of direct certification with SNAP (i.e. cannot be considered as direct certification in counting and reporting the number of direct certifications completed with SNAP for the direct certification rate purposes), SNAP agencies may continue to provide letters as a secondary method to notify families of their children's categorically eligibility. The LEA may accept the SNAP letter to establish eligibility, in lieu of the household providing an application. In this circumstance, the LEA may choose the flexibility in this memorandum to consider the effective date of eligibility to be the date the LEA receives the SNAP letter documenting categorical eligibility. The effective date used must be clearly documented (e.g., date stamp) to establish the date the LEA received the letter.

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LISTS OR OTHER FORMS OF DOCUMENTATION

A further method of identifying students eligible to be directly certified is via a list of students or other documentation provided to the school or LEA directly from the appropriate State or local agency establishing Other Source Categorically Eligible. Generally this method is used to directly certify students in foster care, Head Start or Even Start programs, or to establish categorical eligibility for migrants, runaways, and homeless students.

Effective Date of Eligibility:
At the LEA's discretion, the effective date of eligibility may be the date the LEA or school receives such lists or other forms of acceptable documentation from the appropriate State or local agency establishing Other Source Categorically Eligible, rather than the date the school official processed the documentation. The effective date used must be clearly documented, such as a date stamp (or electronic date, if received electronically) to document the date the list or other form of documentation was received by the LEA.

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