



Elaine M. Howle *State Auditor*

CONTACT: Margarita Fernández | (916) 445-0255 x 343 | MargaritaF@auditor.ca.gov

## Pandemic Food Assistance Programs

*The California Department of Social Services Has Struggled to Deliver Timely Food Assistance Because of Unclear Federal Expectations and Other Factors Beyond Its Control*

### Background

To help address the increasing levels of food insecurity as schools suspended in-person learning and unemployment grew due to the impact of COVID-19, the federal government authorized additional forms of food assistance for families through two programs. One program provides additional payments known as emergency allotments, to families enrolled in the existing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The other, and newly created, food assistance program—Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT)—provides payments to families whose children would have received free or reduced-price meals at their school or child-care site. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) oversees both programs, which, in total, brings in an additional \$10.3 billion in aid to eligible families.

### Key Recommendations

By February 2022, CDSS should do the following:

- Identify the schools attended by children whose families have not used their P-EBT cards and request that those schools provide these families with information about the program and their eligibility.
- Directly contact the families of child-care age children to provide these families with program information.

### Key Findings

- Although CDSS has been able to quickly distribute additional SNAP payments and most P-EBT payments during the early months of the pandemic, the additional P-EBT payments have been delayed with families waiting average of more than 200 days to receive payments that replaced missed meals.
  - » Families with children under the age of six have had to wait 226 days on average for payments meant to replace meals at child-care sites.
  - » Families with school-age children have had to wait at least 264 days on average.
- Key factors that have delayed P-EBT payments are largely outside of CDSS's control.
  - » The federal government took months to authorize the program and issue related guidance—it authorized payments for most of school year 2020–21 in October 2020, amended the requirements in late December 2020, and finalized guidance in January 2021.
  - » Unlike the straightforward approach for calculating payments for school year 2019–20, the federal expectations were unclear and complex for school year 2020–21—CDSS had to repeatedly revise and resubmit its P-EBT plan for approval.
  - » Both the vendor that produces the State's benefits cards and food retailers that accept the cards have had capacity constraints.
- Although most eligible households are using their P-EBT payments, families have not used about 500,000 P-EBT cards CDSS sent them for school year 2019–20, leaving at least \$182 million in payments unused.



**P-EBT payments expire after 365 days of inactivity, meaning that families who do not use their payments could lose them.**