



Food Assistance in Colorado

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Federal, state, and local entities work to deliver programs and initiatives to increase food security and accessibility for Coloradans. This *issue brief* provides an overview of key programs and efforts within the state, including beneficiaries, operations, and funding.

Colorado Food Assistance Programs

Colorado's food assistance landscape has three levels: federal programs that are state-facilitated, state-led initiatives, and local and community efforts.

Federally Funded Programs

State agencies provide logistical support for federal nutrition programs that aid children, families, seniors, and homeless individuals. This includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), child nutrition programs, and food distribution programs.

SNAP

SNAP is administered by state and county human services departments and provides

monthly stipends to low-income individuals and families to purchase food. The benefit is dependent on income, resources, and household size. Participants must also meet certain work requirements to maintain eligibility. The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) provides support and training to county staff, while county staff determine eligibility and process applications. SNAP benefits are federally funded, while funding for program staff comes from federal, state, and local sources.

According to the CDHS, on average, \$87 million in food benefits is issued every month to more than 250,000 households and 499,000 individuals in Colorado. In 2020, about 28 percent of participants were under the age of 18. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that the average SNAP benefit for each household member is \$181 per month in FY 2023-24.

Colorado WIC

Similar to SNAP, the WIC program is administered by state and county offices and provides food stipends and related nutrition and health services to low-income mothers and children. For FY 2023-24, \$88.1 million in total funding was allocated for the program, including \$124,000 in state funding and \$87.9 million in federal funding.

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School Nutrition Programs

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) administers several federally funded programs to provide meals to schools and children. Federal programs like the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program reimburse school meal providers for all or a portion of the cost of meals based on family income. To receive federal funds, the state must also contribute money to the lunch program (\$2.5 million in FY 2023-24). School participation data for the various nutrition programs are available on the CDE [website](#).

Food Distribution Programs

CDHS provides support for the distribution of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) foods to Colorado households, food banks, schools, and child care facilities. State agencies also have the authority to release USDA foods for disasters and emergencies.

State Initiatives

State legislation and voter-approved ballot initiatives have enhanced access to food for Coloradans through grants and programs.

Grant Programs

The state provides grants through various state departments to help distribute food. Grant programs such as the Colorado Commodity Supplemental Food Grant Program created in [House Bill 23-1158](#) and the Food Pantry Assistance Grant Program created in [HB 20-1422](#), and extended by [HB 22-1364](#) and [SB 23-027](#), allocate state funding to provide additional financial assistance for the operations of federal nutrition programs, food banks, and food pantries.

Food Programs

[HB 22-1380](#) created the Community Food Access Program in the Colorado Department of Agriculture to improve access to and lower prices for healthy foods in low-income or underserved areas in Colorado by supporting small grocery retailers. The bill also used federal American Rescue Plan Act funding to improve SNAP operations.

The Healthy School Meals for All Program, approved by voters in November 2022 through [Proposition FF](#), requires the state to provide free school meals to students beginning in the 2023-24 school year, paid through higher taxes on certain high-income taxpayers. Further, the state will directly certify students enrolled in Medicaid as eligible for free and reduced-price meals without further application. During the 2023-24 school year, the state will reimburse participating schools an estimated \$115.0 million for free meals. More details on the funding for the program and reimbursements can be found in the [Senate Bill 23-221](#) LCS fiscal note.

Local Organizations

The work of food banks, food pantries, and local organizations also plays a critical role in Colorado's food assistance landscape by providing relief and support at the community level. These organizations act alongside county departments as outreach partners for the SNAP program, working to increase participation in the program by helping individuals in their communities enroll in the program. The funding sources for these local efforts are diverse, and can include grants from federal and state governments and other organizations, as well as donations and other fundraising.