



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Food and  
Nutrition  
Service

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DATE: April 13, 2014

MEMO CODE: SP 33-2015

SUBJECT: Revised Prototype Free and Reduced Price Application Materials:  
Policy Changes and Design Overview

TO: Regional Directors  
Special Nutrition Programs  
All Regions

State Directors  
Child Nutrition Programs  
All States

In response to feedback from stakeholders, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is providing an updated and fully revised *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals*, with accompanying prototype letter to households and instructions document. These materials (attached) may be adapted either for direct use by State and local agencies, or as a reference for designing an effective application packet that meets all statutory and regulatory requirements.

This prototype was redesigned to make it easier for families to complete so they can provide accurate information. We encourage you to use this prototype to support access to school meals, especially for children whose parents may have limited literacy, and to strengthen program integrity. School food authorities that use this prototype application in the upcoming school year will comply with Federal requirements and will meet all criteria examined during administrative reviews for the application in school year (SY) 2015-2016.

This SY 2015-2016 prototype represents a notable departure from prior versions and reflects modifications to existing policy. This memorandum highlights and explains key changes. Prototype applications and letters for use in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and Summer Food Service Program will be provided later this year.

### **Background**

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is committed to providing guidance and resources to our stakeholders that fully meet their needs and expectations. Based on feedback gathered over time, we have determined that the prototype application format provided in recent years would be more useful to program operators if it were revised. In response to these concerns, we engaged with The Innovation Lab at the Office of

Personnel Management (OPM Lab) on a yearlong, multi-phase project to explore ways in which FNS could improve the usability and overall design of our prototype application materials, with an added focus on enhancing program integrity.

The OPM Lab employs an approach to problem solving known as Human Centered Design (HCD). HCD is a philosophy and iterative process that focuses first and foremost on the needs and motivations of the people who use any given product. This application and the accompanying materials were developed using an HCD-based process which involved research on application design practices, stakeholder interviews with State and local officials, a review of existing statutes and regulations, and most importantly, a series of focus tests with parents likely to fill out a free and reduced price school meals application.

### **Modifications to Existing Policy Effective for SY 2015-2016**

The following changes will be fully reflected in the 2015 edition of the *Eligibility Manual for School Meals*, which is currently under development and will be released in spring of 2015.

#### *Streamlined income reporting for non-adult household members*

Previously, USDA's prototype application requested individualized income reporting for each child household member. In recognition that many children and students do not receive income on a regular basis, the updated prototype format streamlines income reporting for all children and students into a *single* reporting field, located in the same section in which income for adults is reported. Adults must still report their income by household member and by category. The simplified process for child income reporting is intended to reduce confusion for household members completing the application and reduce clutter on the application.

#### *Indication of 'No Income'*

USDA has frequently received feedback regarding the attestation requirements for household members with no income to report. In prior years, State and local agencies were directed to obtain an indication of no income from the applicant, such as requiring them to write a zero in each applicable field or mark a 'No Income' box or bubble. If an income field for any household member was left blank, that application was considered incomplete. In practice, many State and local officials have reported that applicants with no income typically leave the income reporting fields blank resulting in administrative burden for school districts in the form of unnecessary follow-up contact with households.

Beginning in SY 2015-2016, applications must still request that applicants write a zero when there is no income to report, but will no longer *require* a separate indication of no income from the applicant. Instead, applications must include a clear and easy to understand instruction that communicates to applicants that *any income field left blank is a positive indication of no income* and certifies that there is no income to report. As such, applications with blank income fields

should be processed by the school district as complete. However, should local officials have known or available information that the household has intentionally misreported its income, they must verify any such application for cause.

### **Application Design Highlights**

In addition to the above changes, the revised *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* features a number of design features and improvements that streamline and clarify the application process for households, including:

- At the head of the document, households are encouraged to apply online. (Only applicable for school districts where online applications are made available.)
- A “sidebar” has been incorporated to provide limited instructions and other pieces of helpful information to applicants while they fill out the application.
- Adult and non-adult (children/students) household members are cleanly divided into separate reporting sections to prevent household members from being listed twice, as well as to encourage full reporting of all household members.
- The reporting fields for non-adults have been expanded to better ensure that enough space is provided to write each child or student’s full name.
- All income reporting fields ask for whole dollars only, which simplifies income reporting for the household while reducing processing burden for the school district.
- Income descriptions on the application have been simplified to avoid confusing language.
- As an added accountability measure, a field has been added for reporting the total number of members in the household.
- Information about the Social Security Number is now requested in the same section as the income reporting field (rather than in the signature block), as applicants indicating categorical eligibility through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) are not required to provide this information.
- The phrase “(if available)” has been added to the address line in the signature section to provide flexibility to applicants who may lack a permanent address. Applications without an address are considered complete.

- Race and Ethnic Data collection survey and the USDA Non-Discrimination statement have been updated and remain on the prototype application. Although the survey is optional for households it is required to be on the application. The USDA Non-Discrimination statement must also be part of the application.

### **Accompanying Prototype Materials**

The *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* is accompanied by the following materials:

- A prototype letter to households, titled *Frequently Asked Questions About Free and Reduced Price School Meals*
- Prototype application instructions, titled *How to Apply for Free and Reduced Price School Meals*

These documents were also developed using HCD principles and are intended to present relevant information to applicants in a logical and straightforward manner. Plain language was used wherever possible, and both documents feature a middle school reading grade level.

The instructions feature detailed charts to assist applicants complete the income reporting section of the application. The application includes limited instructions, but directs applicants to the full instructions where more detailed information will assist with fully and accurately completing the application process. The letter to households provides expanded information for military households, as well as clarifications regarding the definition of homeless, migrant, and runaway students, as households frequently struggle to accurately self-identify when children matching these descriptions are present. In addition, the chart detailing the family size income levels for reduced price meal eligibility has been relocated from the application to the parent letter. This information is required by law to be provided to households when they receive their household application materials, along with an explanation that households with incomes less than or equal to those values are eligible for free or reduced price school meals, but the information does not have to be located on the actual application.

### **Non-English Language Versions**

This initial release only includes the English language version of the prototype materials. A Spanish language packet is currently in the final stages of development and is expected to be released by April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015. USDA anticipates translating these new prototype materials into all 34 languages in which the prototype application is currently made available for SY 2016-2017. Until these additional language translations are released, State and local agencies may continue to use the translated application materials, available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/applying-free-and-reduced-price-school-meals>

**Availability of Prototype Free and Reduced Price Application Materials**

All the prototype documents are currently available on the Food and Nutrition Service website at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/applying-free-and-reduced-price-school-meals>

The prototype application is made available in the following formats for ease of adaptation at the State and local level:

- Microsoft Word
- Adobe PDF
- Adobe Illustrator

The prototype household letter and application instructions are made available in Microsoft Word.

State agencies are reminded to distribute this memo to program operators immediately to ensure full understanding of the policy modifications outlined above. School food authorities with questions regarding this memorandum are encouraged to contact their State agency. State agencies should contact their Regional office with any questions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Angela Kline". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Angela Kline  
Director  
Policy and Program Development Division  
Child Nutrition Programs

Attachments