

Led by Mississippi, 15 states opt out of children's food program for low-income families

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On January 10, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (Summer EBT) would begin this year. Under the program, children who receive free or reduced lunch during the school year could also be eligible to receive \$120 in food benefits spread across three months during the summer. This pittance equals about \$40 per month, or about \$1.33 per lunch.

Thirty-five states have either opted into the program or have yet to make a formal declaration either way. It is expected that the program will provide paltry food benefits to nearly 21 million children in low-income families across states and territories that have chosen to participate. However, 15 states led by Republican governors have already rejected participating in the program, leaving more than eight million children ineligible to receive the benefits.

Some of the states that are refusing to participate include Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, and Wyoming. In some cases governors have refused to comment on why they are not participating, while others have demagogically postured against expanding “Biden’s welfare state.”

In Mississippi, Trump-aligned Republican Governor Tate Reeves has already publicly rejected the program. Reeves’ decision will impact more than 324,000 children, according to the Food Research and Action Center.

From 2019 to 2021, the average food insecurity rate in Mississippi was 15.3 percent, the highest in the US and nearly 50 percent higher than the national average of

10.4 percent. The US Census Bureau recently reported that over 22 percent of households in Mississippi lack sufficient food to maintain a proper diet. Additionally, the state has a child poverty rate of 28 percent, nearly double the national average.

Despite widespread poverty and hunger in Mississippi, Reeves justified denying food benefits to children as part of the war to combat “attempts to expand the welfare state.” Reeves’ rationale was echoed by every other Republican governor who decided not to participate in the Summer EBT program.

“I don’t believe in welfare,” said Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen in an interview *The Journal Star* back in late December. A USDA survey released last November found that over 12 percent of Nebraskans faced food insecurity between 2020-2022, roughly a full percentage point higher than the national average.

Pillen’s decision will deprive about 150,000 students of \$18 million worth in benefits. It would have only cost the state about \$300,000 in administrative costs to implement the program, according to a review by Nebraska Appleseed.

Justifying his rejection of the program, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt said it would merely add “more bureaucracy for families to wade through.”

South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster claimed the program was “a COVID-related benefit, extra. We’ve got to get back to doing normal business. We can’t be doing that forever...”

The attack on social programs that benefit the working class is bipartisan. Almost a year ago, the Democratic administration of President Joe Biden

drastically reduced food stamp benefits for 42 million poor and working-class Americans.

In Louisiana, where 27 percent of children are living in poverty and 21 percent “often go hungry,” according to Feeding America, outgoing Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards refused to opt into the program before leaving office earlier this month.

Approximately 13 percent of the state’s population, or 600,000 children, as per the USDA, would be eligible for benefits. Current Republican Governor Jeff Landry, as of this writing, has yet to decide whether the state will participate.

In Iowa, Republican Governor Kim Reynolds cited “childhood obesity” as the rationale for depriving 240,000 children of needed benefits. In justifying the decision to reject \$29 million in food assistance, Reynolds advanced fascistic and unscientific arguments, including claiming that starvation could be beneficial for obese children. “[A]n EBT card does nothing to promote nutrition at a time when childhood obesity has become an epidemic,” said Reynolds.

Reynolds’ right-wing attack ignores the economic constraints faced by the poor and working class families who are often forced to purchase and consume cheaper foods, which are frequently high in carbohydrates and high fructose corn syrup.

Inflation has continued to eat away at workers’ stagnant paychecks, resulting in more and more workers and their families “skipping” meals or “filling up” on unhealthy calories. This diet, along with the stress of hunger, contributes to weight gain and numerous associated health issues, including early-onset diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart attacks.

Reynolds and her Republican colleagues’ statements, coupled with the bipartisan assault on social programs brings to mind the Nazi “Hunger Plan,” where starvation was employed as a tool to manipulate and control populations. While the contexts may differ, the impact on vulnerable sections of the working class, particularly children, raises the necessity for a socialist alternative.

In response to Reynolds’ decision to opt out of the program, Iowa Hunger Coalition board chair Luke

Elzinga said, “Hunger is a policy choice, and this is just one more unfortunate example of that fact,” adding, “It’s deplorable that Iowa’s leadership has chosen to make feeding children a political issue.”

It is a political issue. While both parties find and justify seemingly unlimited funds for war, social services for the working class such as existing summer nutrition programs fall significantly short in reaching the numerous families who depend on free and reduced-price school meals throughout the school year. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that the enrollment deadline coincides with Congress grappling with the threat of another government shutdown.

The Biden administration, which is negotiating with Republicans on supplemental war package totaling over \$110 billion, issued a warning to lawmakers that failing to avert a shutdown this month could result in over 2 million Americans being denied access to a critical federal assistance program designed for low-income families.



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