TEFAP Fact Sheet

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a federal program that helps supplement the diets of people with low-income by providing them with emergency food assistance at no cost. FNA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), administers TEFAP at the federal level; and all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam administer the program at the state level.

Through TEFAP, USDA purchases a variety of nutritious, high-quality USDA Foods, and makes those foods available to state distributing agencies. The amount of food each state agency receives is based on the number of unemployed persons and the number of people living below the poverty level in the state/territory. State agencies provide the food to local agencies that they have selected, usually food banks, which distribute the food to local organizations that directly serve the public, such as soup kitchens and food pantries. State agencies also provide the food to other types of local organizations, such as community action agencies, which distribute the foods directly to individuals. These local organizations distribute USDA Foods to eligible recipients for household consumption or use them to prepare and serve meals.

State agencies also receive administrative funds through TEFAP to support the storage and distribution of USDA Foods. These funds must, in part, be passed down to local agencies.

The program is authorized by The Emergency Food Assistance Act of 1983 and The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008. Federal TEFAP regulations can be found at 7 CFR Parts 250 and 251.

Program Operation



Public or private nonprofit organizations that provide nutrition assistance to people with low-income, by providing prepared meals or food for use at home, may be eligible to distribute USDA Foods through TEFAP. These organizations are known as eligible recipient agencies (ERAs), and TEFAP state agencies are in charge of selecting the ERAs that they will work with in their state or territory. All ERAs must meet minimum requirements outlined in program regulations; for example, those that provide prepared meals must demonstrate that they predominately serve people with low-income.

The types of foods USDA purchases for TEFAP vary depending on the preferences of state agencies and on agricultural market conditions. More than 130 nutritious, high-quality products are available. Products include canned, frozen, dried, juiced, and fresh fruits and vegetables; protein items such as meat, fish, eggs, nuts, and beans; whole and enriched grains such as rice, flour, cereals, pasta, and tortillas; and dairy products like milk, yogurt, and cheese. For a complete list of foods available through TEFAP, refer to the USDA Foods Available List for TEFAP.

Eligibility

Recipients of food for home consumption must meet statewide income eligibility guidelines. State agencies set these guidelines which may allow recipients to be income eligible for TEFAP via participation in other existing food, health, or social service programs for which eligibility is based on income.

Recipients of prepared meals are presumed to have low income and are not subject to a means test.

TEFAP recipients may be eligible for a number of other FNA nutrition assistance programs.

Funding

In fiscal year (FY) 2024, TEFAP received $461.5 million to purchase USDA Foods and $80 million for TEFAP administrative costs. In addition to USDA Foods purchased with appropriated funds, TEFAP distributes ‘bonus’ foods purchased by USDA to support agricultural markets. In FY 2023, $955 million of such foods were made available to TEFAP. In FY 2024, USDA also provided an additional $943 million to TEFAP under the statutory authority of the Commodity Credit Corporation.



Program History

TEFAP was first authorized in 1981 to distribute foods purchased by USDA to support agriculture markets. The program was initially designed to help reduce federal food surpluses while assisting low-income persons. Because food surpluses had largely been depleted by 1988, Congress passed the Hunger Prevention Act of 1988, authorizing funds to be appropriated for the purchase of USDA Foods specifically for TEFAP. Foods acquired with appropriated funds are in addition to any ‘bonus’ foods purchased by USDA to support agriculture markets. The program was officially named The Emergency Food Assistance Program under the 1990 Farm Bill.

Contact Us

Contact your TEFAP state agency for more information about TEFAP. You can also email us at USDAFoods@usda.gov.

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