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JOHNS HOPKINS
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New Orleans and Louisiana Food Policy Councils

USDA's summer EBT program — officially known as SUN Bucks — was created to get meals to families who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals during summer months. It looked like a long shot to get summer EBT in Louisiana, but the New Orleans Food Policy Council gave it a go.

Starting in 2024, the New Orleans Food Policy Council and its partners advocated for the creation of a summer EBT program in Louisiana in a campaign that started out looking like the longest of long shots.

USDA administers summer EBT — officially known as SUN Bucks — a program created to help families who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals but lack that benefit during summer months.

'Why are we turning down free money for children?'

The council's Elisa Munoz described how the advocacy campaign began in Louisiana:

"The governor, like very many other Republican governors at the time, said 'No, thank you,' to summer EBT. So, we were like, 'Hold on. We have one of the highest child food insecurity rates. We need it in Louisiana.'"

The council partnered with the New Orleans Health Department, American Heart Association, Agenda for Children, and the New Orleans chapter of the Second Harvest Food Bank because they all realized, "We really need this. We've got to have summer EBT."



“So, we pulled together all the statistics,” said Munoz, who is now Director of Strategy and Development for the Louisiana Food Policy Council. “And, I think our ace in the hole in that is that we have an amazing lobbyist. Not on staff, but [one] that we have worked with in the past.”

Munoz said the rallying cry became, “Why are we turning down free money for children?” With that in mind, the council commissioned a partner lobbyist to ask this question of the state legislature.

“Our lobbyist went to a lawmaker that we’ve had a good relationship with — he’s a Republican, and he is the head of the Appropriations Committee, Jack McFarland. Our lobbyist made this case to him — ’We’re turning down free money for kids all over the state — and [McFarland] was like, ‘Whaaaat?’

“And during all of that, we were calling as many representatives as we could; we had made one-pagers to make the case; we had written an op-ed in the New Orleans newspaper. We had our lobbyist working there, and then we had done as much advocacy and grassroots organizing as we could.”

Throwing a ‘Hail Mary’ for a deadline extension

Just to complicate matters, the state of Louisiana had missed the USDA’s deadline for submitting a summer EBT plan. Not to worry, though, because the advocates asked for and received an extension from USDA.

“They can only turn you down if you ask,” Munoz said. “It was kind of a Hail Mary. Let’s just see if we convince [USDA], would they allow it, and they said ‘Sure.’

“We didn’t even know that it had happened until we saw the news release that they will now be doing summer EBT. We were like ‘It worked! Great!’

What’s more, the program was renewed in 2025 without any need for a lobbying effort.

Munoz pointed out that it is easier to retain a program than to get it instituted in the first place, because if the state kills the program, “then they’re taking it away. Then, we can really show we helped this many people. Now, they’re literally taking money from families.”



Legislators love farmers, too

In 2025, the New Orleans Food Policy Council expanded their efforts through the statewide initiative, Louisiana Food Policy Council (LaFPC). As part of the statewide expansion, the Louisiana FPC joined the successful campaign to allocate state money to replace farmer-related funds lost to federal budget cuts in 2025, which reduced federal support for Louisiana farmers by $11 million.

While they weren’t able to replace all of those dollars, their advocacy did prompt the state to

cover $3 million in lost federal revenue. Farmers will get much of that benefit through direct food purchasing programs for farm-to-institution, farm-to-school, and farm-to-daycare facilities, as well as purchasing by food banks. In addition, farmers can receive infrastructure grants for projects such as new packing sheds, tractors, or equipment, with those resources sometimes shared by several farms.

The council and its partners enlisted the farmers themselves to help with this lobbying campaign.

“Once you take money from farmers’ pockets, they are a lot more apt to ask for it,” Munoz said.

So, the council facilitated discussion between farmers and policymakers by holding a farmers’ market in the lobby of the State Capitol Building in Baton Rouge. The council had already paid for the produce that was on offer, so it was free to lawmakers and their staffers, and farmers didn’t have to worry about lost income.

The council invited any farmer who wanted to come to the Capitol, paid for their transportation, and asked specific ones to testify. Some testimonies came from farmers who had been promised federal funding that didn’t come through.

This advocacy effort was funded by the Center for Science in the Public Interest and was again partly spearheaded by lobbyists.

“A lot of our success at the state level has been because we have great lobbyists that we have a good relationship with,” Munoz stressed. “And those lobbyists have been working within a conservative state for a long time.

“We may have what seems like, on the outside, strange bedfellows. Our biggest champion is a Republican, and he’s a timber guy [McFarland]. But he comes from farmers, and he understands the impact of hunger and all of that on the state, and he’s well respected.”



Munoz and her colleagues understand that farmers are a winning issue in the policy world.

“What we have realized is that policymakers love a farmer. They loooove a farmer. So, if we showed the impact that all of our stuff has on farmers, they’re much more likely to do it than if we say this will reduce poverty, frankly.”