



THE ILLINOIS COMMISSION TO END HUNGER

# ANNUAL REPORT



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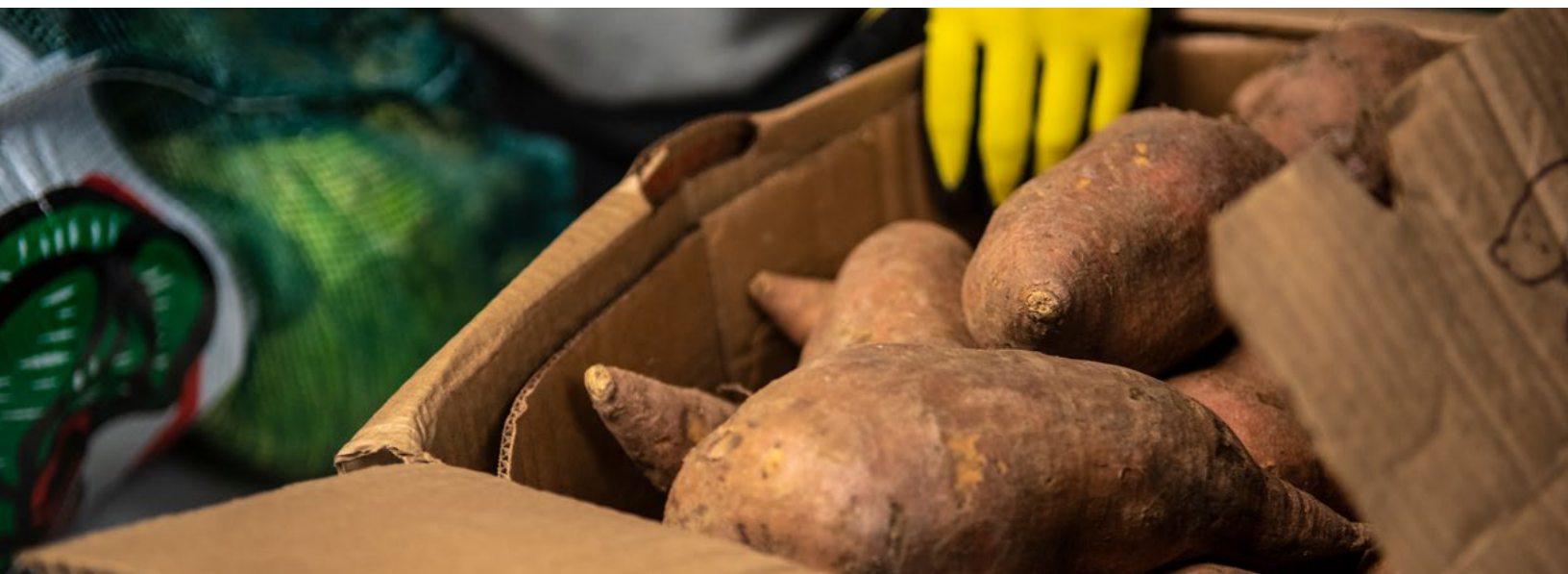
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# WHO WE ARE —

## Illinois Commission to End Hunger

The Illinois Commission to End Hunger is a public-private partnership composed of stakeholders from across the state dedicated to the belief that no one in Illinois should ever face hunger. The Commission was established by the Commission to End Hunger Act of 2010 with the purpose of developing an action plan to ensure cross-collaboration among government entities and community partners toward the shared goal of ending hunger in Illinois.

### CO-CHAIRS

Sol Flores, State of Illinois, Deputy Governor

Kate Maehr, Greater Chicago Food Depository, CEO

### COMMISSION MEMBERS

Jenny Aguirre, Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, Office of the Director, Strategic Vendor Relationships, Administrator

Grace Hou, Illinois Department of Human Services, Secretary

Robert Baren, Illinois Department of Agriculture, Legislative Liaison

Mattie Hunter, Illinois State Senate, 3rd District Senator

Paula Basta, Illinois Department on Aging, Director

Robert Karr, Illinois Retail Merchants Association (IRMA), President and CEO

Robert Biekman

Jonathan Lavin

Gina Cleggs, Catholic Charities, Senior Vice President Operations and Innovation

Charles Meier, Illinois House of Representatives, 108th District Representative

Diane Doherty, Illinois Hunger Coalition, Executive Director

April Janney, Illinois Action for Children, President and CEO

Robert Eastern III, City of East St. Louis, Mayor

Angela Odoms-Young, University of Illinois at Chicago Institute for Health Research and Policy, Associate Professor

Stephen Ericson, Feeding Illinois, Executive Director

Luvia Quiñones, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant & Refugee Rights (ICIRR), Health Policy Director

Joshua Gibb, Galesburg Community Foundation, President and CEO

Sue Rezin, Illinois State Senate, 38th District Senator

Mark Haller, Illinois State Board of Education, Nutrition Department, Director

Carolyn Ross, All Chicago, President and CEO

Elizabeth Hernandez, Illinois House of Representatives, 24th District Representative

Marc Smith, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Director

John Herring, Sr., Illinois Network of Centers for Independent Living, Executive Director

Audra Wilson, Shriver Center on Poverty Law, President and CEO



# LETTER FROM THE CO-CHAIRS —

In 2021, the Illinois Commission to End Hunger released *[From Food Insecurity to Food Equity: A Roadmap for Ending Hunger in Illinois](#)*. That report laid out an ambitious, multi-year plan to reduce food insecurity in Illinois and advance food equity for the long-term. By focusing on strategies to leverage technology, harness innovation, and support collaboration, the *Roadmap* will reduce barriers to program access and increase uptake of nutrition assistance programs in Illinois.

Since the release of the *Roadmap*, the Commission has formed three working groups to help advance the three pillars of technology, innovation, and collaboration, which include community voices from around our state. Each workgroup has developed a workplan with action steps to advance the vision laid out in the *Roadmap*. Over the last 18 months, the Commission has had huge success in moving forward *Roadmap* recommendations. This report summarizes key progress made toward the *Roadmap* recommendations.

As we continued the nationwide recovery from the pandemic over the last year, we saw crisis and hardship — but also dedication, creativity, and a community coming together.

The emergency efforts and COVID policies that were put in place over the last two years showed us that we can mitigate the worst effects of a crisis and avoid widespread hunger, showing that real change can lead to real steps forward. Across the

nutritional safety net, state and local agencies worked with the federal government to eliminate barriers that kept families from food. Service providers and food banks created innovative programs to connect with people facing hunger in new ways. Community groups and neighbors mobilized to ensure that even the most isolated in their community could get help with food.

While these efforts demonstrated incredible innovation and resilience, there is still more work to be done. Over the last year, historic double digit food inflation has added new stress to household budgets. More families are struggling to put food on the table as they are faced with sharply rising prices for basic necessities like food, gasoline, and utilities.

We know that our work to find solutions to address hunger long-term is more important than ever. Even as we continue to advance the recommendations laid out in the *Roadmap*, we are mindful to center the needs of our communities in our work and be responsive to shifting needs. Looking at the experience of the last few years and the unique ways in which families with children have been impacted, we believe we have an obligation to give additional focus to how we reduce not just child food insecurity but racial disparities in child food insecurity.

*Our work continues in collaboration with all those who fight so tirelessly to feed the hungry. We thank each of you for supporting that effort.*





## Technology Working Group

Technology has the power to transform the way we interact with the world. The Technology Working Group is working to leverage the power of technology to better facilitate and maintain enrollment in nutrition assistance programs.

*Co-chairs: Audra Wilson, Shriver Center; Tom Browning, Illinois Action for Children*

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Objective: Create a simplified mobile-friendly application for SNAP to make it easier for people to apply for and maintain benefits**

Progress Report: IDHS has taken first steps toward making the SNAP application and case management website mobile friendly. A mobile phone friendly application will expand access to those that may not have a personal computer or Wi-Fi. The Commission completed a survey of SNAP participants to better understand their access to and use of technology to help inform decisions about technology modernization in how individuals apply for and maintain benefits.

- **Objective: Encourage school districts to provide electronic applications for free and reduced-price school meals to provide an alternative way for families to enroll in breakfast and lunch**

Progress Report: The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) received funding to create a statewide online school meals application, which will streamline the application process ensuring easier application and processing for families and administrators. The Commission completed focus groups and a survey with parents of school-aged children to better understand how they currently apply for child nutrition programs and their preferences around program application to inform the development of a statewide online school meal application and other strategies to simplify the enrollment process for child nutrition programs.

- **Objective:** Leverage e-mail and texting platforms to facilitate communication with nutrition program clients about applications, appointments, and renewals

Progress Report: In 2022, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) began using text and email to communicate with clients, creating greater reach to participants and increasing the likelihood of participants meeting important deadlines to maintain enrollment in nutrition benefits. Text and email communications will be used to remind people of upcoming interviews, needed paperwork, and application status.

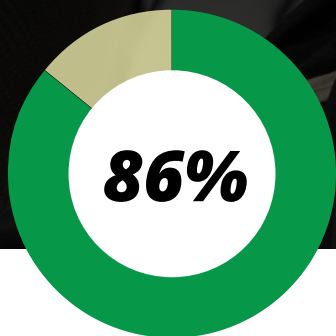
*“If you would be able to upload documents yeah — I would prefer that — the application would go with your documents, it wouldn’t get lost.”*

— focus group participant, Technology Working Group

## TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP LOOK AHEAD

The Technology Working Group will continue to explore the individual experience of applying for and managing SNAP benefits online. To that end, the Working Group will be conducting focus groups with SNAP clients and conducting usability testing of the client-facing portal to learn more about barriers and challenges and identify ways to make online tools easier to use.

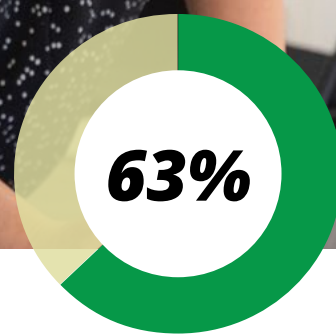
In an effort to better understand Illinois SNAP participants’ use of technology in how they apply for, maintain, and redeem benefits, the Commission reviewed the results of a recent survey, conducted by the Greater Chicago Food Depository, of nearly 200 SNAP participants in Cook County.



86% of survey participants rely primarily on smart phones to call, text, or access the internet



80% of all respondents indicated they had daily access to the internet for web browsing



63% of older adults participating in the survey had daily internet access

*Key learnings include that over 86% of survey participants rely primarily on smart phones to call, text, or access the internet, underscoring the importance of mobile friendly websites for both sharing information about benefits and benefits applications. While 80 percent of all respondents indicated they had daily access to the internet for web browsing, just 63 percent of older adults participating in the survey had daily internet access, underscoring the importance of phone and in person methods of interaction with public benefits enrollment for older adults.*

# Innovation Working Group

To make sure we are meeting the needs of people facing hunger, the Innovation Working Group is striving to find new and better ways of connecting people with the food they need.

*Co-chairs: Steve Ericson, Feeding Illinois; Amy Rynell, Active Transportation Alliance*

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Objective: Leverage innovative delivery models for groceries and meals, such as online shopping, home delivery, and mobile markets**

Progress Report: In Spring 2021, the Commission worked with the Illinois Retail Merchants Association to sponsor a briefing for retailers across Illinois to promote awareness of the SNAP online option and share information about how to apply to operate the program. This year, IDHS welcomed an additional 6 retailers to the SNAP online program, which allows SNAP participants to use their benefits to buy groceries online. With the addition of 6 new retailers, a combined 83 stores across Illinois will operate the expanded online grocery option for SNAP participants.

- **Objective: Explore innovative ways to source nutritious food for the emergency food system while supporting Illinois agriculture**

Progress Report: Innovation Working Group co-chair, Feeding Illinois, worked with key stakeholders to develop the *Farm to Food Bank* concept, a collaborative strategy aimed at better connecting Illinois producers to Illinois food banks. The program works to build connections between Illinois growers and producers and the emergency food system to support Illinois agriculture, feed hungry families, and reduce food waste.

- **Objective: Secure and implement the Elderly Disabled Simplified Assistance Demonstration Project to make it easier for older adults and people with disabilities to apply for and recertify SNAP benefits**

Progress Report: IDHS expects to begin implementing this Demonstration Project in December 2022. The policy change will extend the period within which eligible participants need to recertify and eliminates the annual eligibility interview requirement. The Commission is developing informational materials to help raise awareness about the policy change among older adults and the community-based organizations that serve them. The Commission also sponsored webinars to provide technical assistance and training to community-based organizations across our state about the policy change.

## INNOVATION WORKING GROUP LOOK AHEAD

The Innovation Working Group interviewed over 30 individual stakeholders to better understand the challenges and barriers to addressing hunger in Illinois communities. The workgroup has identified key themes and outlined strategic ways the working group could move the most promising innovative ideas forward. In addition, the Commission conducted focus groups and surveyed parents to understand barriers to participating in school meal programming and is working to develop strategies to better connect children to those programs.



## **PUSHING FOR BREAKFAST IN THE CLASSROOM POST-COVID**

Mary Poole, Food Service Director at Benton School District, in Southern Illinois, has been advocating for serving breakfast in the classroom for a while, but like many people in her position, she faced pushback.

But when COVID-19 hit, the district was forced to give meals in the classroom a shot to abide by social distancing regulations.

Now, according to Mary, kids eat better. They have more time to eat and are going to the nurse less. Staff has figured out a way to minimize mess and get trash out of the classrooms and out of the building quickly. Classroom aides help supervise during lunch so teachers still get a break. Sure, it's a little more work, but Benton School District thinks it's worth it.

As the pandemic urges a new wave of creativity for balancing in-school learning with safe and healthy practices, now may be the best time to encourage breakfast in the classroom.

*“Research has shown that students are able to learn better when they’re well-nourished. Eating healthy meals has been linked to higher grades, better memory, and higher test scores. I tell my staff always cook with love and we change children’s lives one meal at a time.”*

— Angel Warren-Perry,  
South Holland SD 150,  
Innovation Working Group





# Collaboration Working Group

Ending hunger requires the efforts of multiple stakeholders. The Collaboration Working Group is working across agencies and community-based organizations to advance strategies that improve awareness of food assistance programs and ensure that all doors lead to the programs people need.

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*Co-chairs: Grace Hou, Illinois Department of Human Services; Jill Edelblute, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Objective: Coordinate on a public-private marketing campaign to educate consumers about nutrition programs, utilizing culturally competent communications**

Progress Report: The Collaboration Working Group researched and identified populations that have underutilization of nutrition programs: older adults, families with young children, and mixed immigration status households. The Commission has convened advisory committees with expertise in the target populations and engaged a marketing firm to support the development of awareness and outreach materials. Over the last year, the firm has conducted “insights work” to better understand how to increase awareness and decrease stigma around nutrition assistance programs among the target populations.

- **Objective: Create a one-stop, no wrong door entry point, for example a state 211 line or inter-agency website with comprehensive nutrition program eligibility and enrollment information and referrals to the emergency food system**

Progress Report: The Commission mapped application questions across various public benefit programs to better understand areas of overlap and opportunities for creating a one-stop application for multiple public benefit programs. The Commission has also engaged in conversations with experts across the country to better understand opportunities to improve the online application environment in Illinois.

## COLLABORATION WORKING GROUP LOOK AHEAD

The Collaboration Working Group will launch the statewide marketing campaign and be working with community-based organizations across our state to help distribute these materials.

*“I didn’t know I was eligible since I’ve never qualified for help in the past due to my status. Now that I have a newborn, I was happy to know caring people explained what benefits I might be eligible for, helped me apply for SNAP/LINK, and gave me WIC information over the phone. As a single mother, I don’t have to struggle to decide whether to buy food or clothing for the baby anymore.”* — Undocumented new mother, Collaboration Working Group



# SPOTLIGHT —

## Child Hunger and Racial Disparities

Nearly one in eight children in Illinois live in food insecure households.

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The COVID-19 pandemic increased the number of children experiencing hunger and deepened racial disparities. In the first year of the pandemic, nationally food insecurity increased among black households (19.1% to 21.7%) and Hispanic households (15.6% to 17.2%) but decreased among white households (7.9% to 7.1%).

Hunger, especially when experienced in the early years, can have negative impacts on cognitive development and educational attainment as well as physical and mental health.<sup>1</sup> Maternal prenatal nutrition and nutrition during a child's first 1,000 days of life are paramount in determining neurodevelopment, lifelong mental health, and child and adult physical health.<sup>2</sup> Children who are food insecure experience more physical and mental health challenges, including exhibiting more behavioral issues.<sup>3</sup> Children experiencing hunger are also more likely to receive mental health counseling than low-income children not

experiencing hunger.<sup>4</sup> Academically, food insecure children are less likely to perform well in school and more likely to have lower math scores and poorer grades.<sup>5</sup> Further, children experiencing hunger are more likely to have to repeat a grade, receive special education services than low-income children who do not experience hunger.<sup>6</sup>

As we strive to make Illinois the best place in the country to raise a family, it is imperative that we reduce childhood hunger and close racial disparities in child hunger. Federal nutrition programs provide our youth with nutritional support from infancy to young adulthood. Unfortunately, many families who need food assistance do not utilize available programs. Some families may not be aware that they are eligible or know how to sign up; others face barriers to enrollment, or a program does not operate in their community.



As a result, Illinois children are significantly underutilizing important programs like WIC, school breakfast, and the summer meal program:



Roughly 1 in 2 eligible Illinoisans is enrolled in the WIC program, which serves pregnant and postpartum women and young children

Illinois is ranked 37th among states when it comes to school breakfast participation<sup>7</sup>

Only 1 in 9 low-income children who receive meal assistance during the school year also access meal assistance during the summer when school is out

Through the *Roadmap to End Hunger in Illinois*, the Illinois Commission to End Hunger has already begun working on important initiatives to better connect children to nutrition programs and the nutrition they need to thrive. As we enter 2023, we look forward to lifting up these strategies and other opportunities to make progress against child hunger and reduce racial disparities.



# WORK GROUP MEMBERSHIP —

Each work group consists of Commission members, representatives from community-based organizations, and representatives from Illinois state agencies. Below is the full list of current work group members separated by work group focus areas: innovation, collaboration, and technology.

## Technology Working Group

### CO-CHAIRS

Audra Wilson, Shriver Center

Tom Browning, Illinois Action for Children

### WORK GROUP MEMBERS

Diane Doherty, IL Hunger Coalition

Carolyn Ross, AllChicago

John Herring, Network of Centers for Independent Living

Representative Lisa Hernandez, Illinois General Assembly

Josh Gibb, Galesburg Community Foundation

Olga Medina, IL Hunger Coalition

Beth Beachy, Illinois Action for Children

Andie Baker, EverThrive

Willie Gunther, IL Assistive Technology Project

Susan Stanton, Afterschool for Children and Teens Now (ACT Now) Coalition

Kim Drew, Heartland Alliance

Cory Blissett, Illinois Department of Human Services

Bryan Finn, Illinois Department of Human Services

Jamie McCoy, Illinois Department of Human Services

Angie Imhoff, Illinois Department of Human Services

Stephanie Bess, Illinois Department of Human Services

Sophie Milam, Greater Chicago Food Depository

Kelsie Kilner, Greater Chicago Food Depository

Christina Obregon, Greater Chicago Food Depository

Roxanne Ramage, Illinois State Board of Education

Megan Kuchar, Illinois State Board of Education



# Innovation Working Group

## CO-CHAIRS

Steve Ericson, Feeding Illinois

Amy Rynell, Active Transportation Alliance

## WORK GROUP MEMBERS

Rob Karr, IRMA

Mayor Robert Eastern, City of East St. Louis

Jonathan Lavin, Formerly with Age Options

Rob Baren, Illinois Department of Agriculture

Ted Penesis, Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Representative Charles Meier, Illinois General Assembly

Angela Odoms-Young, Cornell University  
(formerly University of Illinois Chicago)

Senator Mattie Hunter, Illinois General Assembly

April Janney, IL Action for Children

Janie Maxwell, Illinois Farmers Market Association

Kathryn Berstein, Illinois Public Health Institute

Meghan Gibbons, Valley View School District 365

Stephen Miller, Liberty Apple Orchard

Krysten Emanuel, Start Early

Melvin Kim, J.R. Albert Foundation

Jennifer Lamplough, Northern Illinois Food Bank

Nicole Hawkins, St. Louis Area Food Bank

Dulce Ortiz, Mano a Mano Family Resource Center  
(Round Lake Park)

Cory Blissett, Illinois Department of Human Services

Kasey Reagan, Illinois Department of Human Services

Terri Vaniter, Illinois Department of Human Services

Sam Tuttle, Greater Chicago Food Depository

Sara Bechtold Medema, Greater Chicago Food Depository

Monique Batteast, Greater Chicago Food Depository

Dean Held, Illinois State Board of Education

Paula Williams, Illinois State Board of Education

Shaista Shaikh, Illinois State Board of Education

# Collaboration Working Group

## CO-CHAIRS

Secretary Grace Hou, Illinois Department of Human Services

Jill Edelblute, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago

## WORK GROUP MEMBERS

Paula Basta, Illinois Department on Aging

Gina Cleggs, Catholic Charities

Marc Smith, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Jenny Aguirre, Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services

Luvia Quinones, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Mark Haller, Illinois State Board of Education

Robert Biekman

Senator Sue Rezin, Illinois General Assembly

Niya Kelly, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless

Katharine Gricevich, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

Derrick Booth, Wrap Around Center

Leslie Cully, Illinois Department of Human Services

Angie Imhoff, Illinois Department of Human Services

Stephanie Bess, Illinois Department of Human Services

Colleen Burns, Greater Chicago Food Depository

Lindsay Blough, Illinois State Board of Education







# CONTACT —

Please feel free to reach out to our team for additional information regarding the Illinois Commission to End Hunger:

Commission to End Hunger, [ICTEH@gcfd.org](mailto:ICTEH@gcfd.org)

Colleen Burns, State Engagement and Innovation Lead, [cburns@gcfd.org](mailto:cburns@gcfd.org)

Ruby Larson, Associate Manager of Policy, [rlarson@gcfd.org](mailto:rlarson@gcfd.org)

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1 Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on our Nation, *Feeding America* <https://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/child-economy-study.pdf>

2 Schwarzenberg, Sarah Jane, and Michael K. Georgieff. "Advocacy for Improving Nutrition in the First 1000 Days to Support Childhood Development and Adult Health." *Pediatrics* 141, no. 2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-3716>.

3 Food Insecurity And Health Outcomes, Gundersen, C. and Ziliak, J. *Health Affairs*. 2015 Nov;34(11):1830-9 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26526240/>

4 Food Research and Action Center, Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>

5 Food Insecurity And Health Outcomes, Gundersen, C. and Ziliak, J. *Health Affairs*. 2015 Nov;34(11):1830-9 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26526240/>

6 Food Research and Action Center, Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>

7 Greater Chicago Food Depository analysis of <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/SchoolMealsReport2022.pdf> Table 5