Moving Quickly to Increase the Reach of Pandemic Nutrition Assistance

As the coronavirus impacted nearly every facet of lives and livelihoods, food insecurity in America surged in 2020, doubling pre-pandemic rates. According to USDA data, households with children are 1.5 times more likely to experience food insecurity. As the country struggled with various responses to the crisis, Indiana leveraged federal funds to reach citizens at their most vulnerable.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 authorized Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) as part of the effort to provide food assistance to families. Administered by states under oversight from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, P-EBT reaches families with children who would receive free or reduced-price school meals while schools are closed or operating at less than full-time attendance because of virus-related restrictions.

In Indiana, the Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) and its Division of Family Resources (DFR) oversee P-EBT assistance. After several months of administering the program, DFR recognized a need for improved data intake and validation to better serve eligible children.
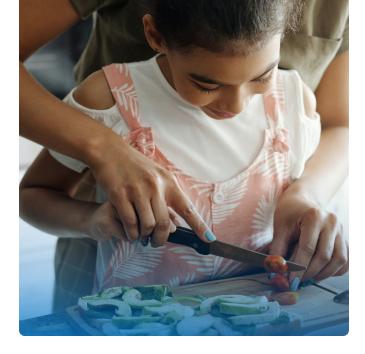
FSSA partnered with Resultant and the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to drive immediate impact for the 2020-21 school year with improved collection and validation for eligibility determination, with the ultimate aims of maximizing staff time and resources while also reaching the right students—and more of them.

THE PROBLEM

Shortly after the P-EBT program was created, DFR hit the ground running, ensuring that thousands of students and their families received much-needed assistance at the peak of the pandemic.

"To spin up and administer this program so quickly meant we were collecting data via a largely manual process that required many school administrators across the state and a sizeable amount of state resources," said Adrienne Shields, Director of the Division of Family Resources at the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration.

"We quickly recognized we could do even more to reach more students and families while saving staff time for other important program priorities," Shields said. "We needed to create a flexible and secure system to provide school districts a standardized data entry format that was easy to use. And we needed a solution that could provide automated data validation to ensure accuracy and reduce the amount of staff hours spent mitigating data errors from manual entry."

APPROACH

Based on many years of successful partnership in support of FSSA data governance and analytics, we were acutely aware of the importance and time-sensitive nature of the problem. Without reliable data, families who urgently needed support could be overlooked during the crisis and in the months and years to come. We needed to work quickly to provide a proof-of-concept data intake and validation solution, and our development team came through in a matter of days.

To provide DFR a thorough and practical introduction to the solution, we recorded a walk-through demo video and held presentations demonstrating the proof of concept. These sessions simulated the data submission process from the school administrator's perspective and explained the various validation controls.

Through a series of feedback sessions that included DFR, FSSA's data analytics team, IDOE, and a series of school administrator pilot partners, iterations of the solution evolved, leading up to the application now in use. This approach leads with empathy and focuses on the needs of end users to guide problem-solving through a collaborative process.
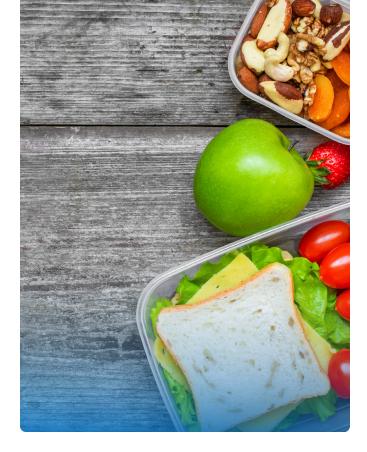
Find out more at **RESULTANT.COM.**

THE OUTCOME

Our collaboration with DFR resulted in a custom application that handles authentication—capturing school-level eligibility for each collection window—and school-level submission workflow, which includes the following:

- Template generation (standard for all schools)

- File upload

- Row-level data validations

- Live processing of the file as processed in the background

- If applicable, error summary and error resolution report

- Submitted screen that shows schools uploaded records

- Notifications triggered by important events in the system

- Realtime submission tracking dashboard for performance evaluation

Users get direct feedback from the application, including detailed error messages when an entry does not meet key requirements.

DFR's solution also required a shift in its data storage approach. The agency needed a secure storage environment that was easy to utilize. We leveraged a cloud-based environment for data storage, enabling DFR to capture eligibility submissions and efficiently aggregate records for processing P-EBT benefits.

- The deployed cloud-based environment allows for rapid point-in-time restores for up to 35 days. Backups retained for longer periods can be automatically stored in lower-cost archival storage tiers.

- In-memory store caching and enhanced cloud features increase application performance.

- Azure data center storage provides DFR highly redundant, agile, and scalable storage options and secure global access.

To ensure the solution was integrated as smoothly and quickly as possible—a paramount concern given the urgency of the need—our team recorded video walk-throughs, facilitated recorded webinars, and provided FAQs and documentation detailing the new tool and processes.

This solution solves immediate service delivery challenges for DFR and can be scaled up as needed or modified to accommodate shifting program requirements.

"The P-EBT program presented an opportunity for FSSA and IDOE to work together on a federal program," said Dr. John Keller, CIO for Indiana Depart-ment of Education. "Leveraging our access and connections to schools through our secure role-base portal, FSSA was able to gather data necessary to administer the program with confidence in the submission process. Resultant helped to broker this relationship and provided the perfect level of connectivity between our agencies with their technical expertise, project management and timely communication support."

THE IMPACT

Following the successful implementation of its P-EBT administration tool, the State surpassed its service goals significantly, reaching more than 150 percent of the eligible students it had set out to reach.

Shields credits the solution for increasing the program's reach: "This collaborative partnership that includes my dedicated staff, Resultant, and our colleagues at the Indiana Department of Education enabled our February issuance of P-EBT assistance covering the last quarter of 2020 to reach over 1,800 schools and provided direct benefit of over $82 million to more than 460,000 eligible students."

Resultant continues to partner with FSSA and IDOE to explore ways in which data and systems modernization efforts across both administrations may serve the program as it continues to evolve.

Find out more at **RESULTANT.COM.**