

The Hagstrom Report

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USDA: States leave millions in school meals administrative funds on table

As Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack prepared to testify on the school meals program before the House Education and Workforce Committee on Tuesday, USDA has revealed that state agencies that oversee school meals have left \$29 million in administrative funds unclaimed.

According to a USDA memo issued on August 15, 2014, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 provided \$47 million for fiscal year 2012 and another \$47 million in fiscal year 2013 to help state agencies implement new meal pattern requirements.

States were slow to claim the money, known as Section 201 funds, and USDA's Food and Nutrition Service has extended the grant application period until September 30, 2015, but states have still not applied for all the money, and \$29 million remains unclaimed.

"This is the final extension allowable for this funding source," the memo said.

The School Nutrition Association, which represents school food service directors and the companies that make school foods, has complained that schools have found implementation of the new rules to be expensive and difficult.

But Cullen Schwarz, the press secretary for Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, told *The Hagstrom Report* Friday that USDA is waiting for more applications.

"Over 95 percent of school districts now report meeting healthier meal standards, and USDA is supporting schools with financial support and free training and technical assistance," Schwarz said.

"In addition to \$185 million in kitchen equipment grants and tens of millions to support staff training and build up farm-to-school programs, USDA made close to \$100 million in administrative funds available to states in order to help schools implement the updated meal standards," he said.

“Even after we extended the deadline and contacted states and schools encouraging them to use these funds, close to \$29 million remains unclaimed. We encourage schools to make use of all of the various forms of support we are providing as necessary,” Schwarz said.

According to the memo, examples of training and technical assistance focus areas that could encompass meal pattern capacity-building could include topics such as:

- Incorporating “smarter lunchroom” strategies to encourage students to choose healthy food;
- Nutrition education curricula;
- Availability of USDA foods to support healthy meals;
- Culinary training for creating tasty, kid-friendly foods and recipes;
- Recipe development;
- Financial management and procurement practices;
- Local wellness policies related to healthy eating at school;
- Program accountability;
- Integrity and the role of the school nutrition director in ensuring that school meals
- Meeting meal pattern requirements;
- Food production and operation management;
- Meal Pattern/HealthierUS School Challenge.

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