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Fresh Ideas

Fiscal Year 2026
Trimester 3

Inside this Issue

Mixing It Up: The Power of Meat Alternates in your CACFP Menus.

Parent Confirmation of Services

The Three-Year Rule: Essential Recordkeeping for CACFP Providers

New Income Eligibility Guidelines

Current Reimbursement Rates

Meal Counts – Some Things You Need to Know

Prior Notice

Common Claim Errors to Watch For

Fiscal Year '27 Food Program Application

Office Closed Dates

ACA's Drop Box

Mix It Up: The Power of Meat Alternates in Your CACFP Menus

(meal patterns)

Adding meat alternates like tofu, beans, lentils, nuts, and seeds to your childcare menu is a win-win for your budget and the children in your care. These versatile foods are more than just "substitutes"—they are nutritional powerhouses that can transform your meal service.

Nutrition That Helps Kids Grow

Meat alternates provide high-quality protein essential for building and repairing growing muscles and tissues. Beyond protein, these plant-based options offer unique benefits:

- Fiber-Rich: Unlike animal meats, beans, peas, and lentils are packed with fiber, which helps children feel full longer and supports healthy digestion.
- Essential Minerals: These foods are excellent sources of B vitamins, iron for oxygenating the blood, and zinc and magnesium for a strong immune system.
- Heart-Healthy Fats: Nuts and seeds provide healthy fats that support brain and heart development.

Smart Savings for Your Home Business

Switching to meat alternates is one of the most effective ways to lower your food costs.

- **Budget-Friendly Protein:** Dried beans, peas, and lentils are significantly less expensive per serving than most animal proteins.
- **Flexible Crediting:** In the CACFP, beans and peas are "double-duty" foods. You can credit them as a meat alternate or as a vegetable (though not both in the same meal), giving you more ways to meet meal pattern requirements.

Try these and save money!

- **Long Shelf Life:** Items like dried lentils or dried beans have long shelf lives, reducing waste and the need for frequent grocery trips.

Expanding Palates and Perspectives

Serving meat alternates exposes children to a wider variety of textures, flavors, and cultural traditions.

- **Texture Exploration:** From the creaminess of a tofu scramble to the crunch of sunflower seeds, these foods provide sensory variety that helps prevent picky eating.
- **Building Healthy Habits:** Introducing plant-based proteins early helps children develop a taste for nutrient-dense, low-fat foods that they can carry into adulthood.
- **Global Flavors:** Many cultures rely on lentils and beans as staples. Serving these helps you create a more culturally diverse environment.

Beans and peas are "double-duty" foods. You can credit them as a meat alternate or as a vegetable (though not both in the same meal).

Quick Crediting Tip: Remember that 3.3 ounces (3/8 cup) of commercially prepared tofu (with at least 5g of protein) or 3/8 cup of cooked beans/peas credits as a 1.5-ounce equivalent of meat alternate.

Menu Ideas:

- Lentil & Veggie soup
- Black bean quesadillas
- Tofu stir-fry
- Chickpea “tuna” salad (replace tuna with mashed chickpeas)

Child Nutrition Recipe Box
Healthy Recipes for Child Nutrition Professionals

Click on the picture for credited plant forward recipes.

Parent Confirmation of Services

(Review procedures, Program reimbursement system)

A Parent confirmation of services is a routine auditing procedure conducted to demonstrate the integrity of the CACFP. Parent confirmations are required by USDA. Being selected for a parent confirmation **DOES NOT** indicate you are suspected of misconduct!

Each month providers are selected for a parent confirmation. Letters are sent to parents asking for information on their child’s Food Program participation. The parent’s answers are compared to the child’s information in KidKare and to the information on your food program claim. Discrepancies are noted, and when necessary, claim deductions are made.

If your parent confirmation is not completed by the time your claim would normally be reimbursed, you will be notified a parent confirmation is being conducted on your claim. Your cooperation with the confirmation may be requested. Although every effort will be made to complete your parent confirmation quickly, it is likely you will experience a delay in receiving some or all your Food Program reimbursement during the month for which the Parent Confirmation is being conducted.

One of the best ways to ensure your parent confirmation concludes quickly is by keeping the data on Child Enrollment Forms current. Accurate parent address, phone numbers, and email address help speed the process along.

If you are selected for a parent confirmation and have any questions about the process, please contact ACA’s office.

Being selected for a parent confirmation DOES NOT indicate you are suspected of misconduct!

The Three-Year Rule: Essential Recordkeeping for CACFP Providers

(recordkeeping)

Records for fiscal year 2026 (October 2025-September 2026) must be kept until January 1, 2030.

As a home-based provider in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), staying organized is just as important as serving nutritious meals. One of the most critical administrative requirements is the **three-year record retention rule.**

The Requirement

Per USDA regulations (7 CFR 226.10(d)), you must keep all CACFP-related records for three years after the submission of the final claim for the fiscal year they cover. In practice, this means records for fiscal year 2026 (October 2025-September 2026) must be kept until January 1, 2030.

Why Does This Regulation Exist?

This rule isn't just about paperwork; it's about program integrity. The USDA requires these records to:

- **Provide an Audit Trail**: Records serve as the legal basis for every reimbursement claim you submit.
- **Verify Compliance**: During administrative reviews or unannounced visits, monitors use these documents to confirm that meals met nutritional standards and that the number of children claimed matches the actual attendance.
- **Resolve Disputes**: If an audit finds discrepancies, records must be kept even longer—until all findings are fully resolved.

You must keep the current month and the previous 12 months of records on-site at your home for immediate review.

Records You Must Keep

To stay compliant, ensure you have the following documentation on file for the required period:

- **Daily Meal Counts**: Records of the number of meals served by type (breakfast, lunch, snacks, etc.).
- **Daily Menus**: Detailed lists of foods served that meet mel pattern requirements.
- **Attendance Records**: Daily documentation of which children were in your care.
- **Enrollment Documentation**: Signed forms for each child, including their normal hours of care and the meals they typically receive, updated annually.

Storage Tips

- **On-Site vs. Off-Site**: You must keep the current month and the previous 12 months of records on-site at your home for immediate review. Records older than 13 months can be stored off-site as long as they remain accessible.
- **Format**: Records can be kept in hard copy or electronic format, provided they are readily available to reviewers.

Remember to make a copy of your completed yearly *Child Renewal Report* before mailing it to ACA.

New Income Eligibility Guidelines

(Program reimbursement system)

Each July the income scale used to qualify for Tier 1 reimbursement rates is reviewed and updated by USDA. Below is the updated scale and rates effective July 1, 2026

Household Income Eligibility Guidelines for Tier I Eligibility July 1, 2026–June 30, 2027

Household Size	$ Per Year	$ Per Month	$ Twice Per Month	$ Per 2 Weeks	$ Per Week
1	29,526	2,461	1,231	1,136	568
2	40,034	3,337	1,669	1,540	770
3	50,542	4,212	2,106	1,944	972
4	61,050	5,088	2,544	2,349	1,175
5	71,558	5,964	2,982	2,753	1,337
6	82,066	6,839	3,420	3,157	1,579
7	92,574	7,715	3,858	3,561	1,781
8	103,082	8,591	4,296	3,965	1,983
Add for each additional household member	10,508	876	438	405	203

If you need Household Income Statements for your families or yourself, you can print them from ACA's web site. Go to www.acainc.org. Click on members only > forms. Print as many forms as you need. If you do not have internet access, call our office and we will mail the forms to you.

Current Reimbursement Rates

(Program reimbursement system)

Tier rates are effective July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2027.

	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
Tier 1	$1.74	$3.31	$0.98
Tier 2	$0.62	$1.99	$0.27

The current reimbursement rates and a history of reimbursement rates can be found at https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/reimbursement-rates

Meal Counts – Some Things You Need to Know

(meal counts)

Meal counts are the **daily records** of the children who were present and the specific meals they were served (breakfast, lunch, supper, or snack). Keeping accurate meal counts is an essential part of CACFP recordkeeping and helps ensure you receive the reimbursement you've earned. Below are a few helpful reminders to keep your records on track.

- **Daily Deadline:** You must record your meal counts **by the end of the day**. While you don't have to do it as the child is eating, waiting until the end of the week is a common finding and can leads to disallowed meals.
- **Actual Participation:** Only record children who were present and served a meal. A common mistake is for providers to claim meals for children who are unexpectedly absent because they forgot the child was not in care.
- **Meal Limit:** Remember that you can only claim a maximum of two meals and one snack or one meal and two snacks, per child, per day.
- **Own Children Rules:** If you claim meals for your own children, your household must be **income-eligible,** and your children must be actively participating in the meal. In addition, at least one enrolled, nonresident child must be present and participating in the childcare program. You must click on your children's names in the KidKare meal count section to be reimbursed for meals or snacks.

  If you are **not eligible** to claim meals for your own children, you do not need to click on them in the KidKare meal count section. The system automatically includes them when calculating your licensed capacity.

If you have any question about completing meal count, please contact ACA.

Keeping accurate meal counts is an essential part of CACFP recordkeeping and helps ensure you receive the reimbursement you've earned.

If you are not eligible to claim meals for your own children, you do not need to click on them in the KidKare meal count section.

Prior Notice

(program reimbursement system, recordkeeping)

Please remember to mark any days your childcare is "closed for business" or when you and the children are "away from home" in your KidKare Provider Calendar. Enter these days as soon as possible. Program Advisors rely on your calendar information to plan effective visit schedules.

If you learn on short notice that your childcare will be closed or that you and the children will be away from the childcare site, please be sure to update the KidKare Provider Calendar and contact ACA by phone or email.

Please note: If prior notice is not provided and a Program Advisor arrives for a meal or snack visit while you are closed or away, you will not be reimbursed for the meal or snack for which the visit was attempted.

Common Claim Errors to Watch For

(review procedures, meal counts, claims submissions, program reimbursement system)

When you serve a whole grain-rich food, be sure the whole grain-rich slider is set to "Yes."

Each month during claims processing, we review submissions and sometimes find errors that can lead to deductions and lower reimbursements. The good news is that many of these issues are easy to avoid! Below are some of the most common errors we see, along with reminders to help keep your claim on track.

- **Whole grain-rich item not marked correctly:**
  When you serve a whole grain-rich food, be sure the whole grain-rich slider is set to **"Yes."** If it's left unchecked, the meal may not credit.
- **Flavored milk recorded:**
  Flavored milk does not credit for children under 6 years of age. Recording flavored milk for this age group can result in a deduction.
- **Missing fruit or vegetable at breakfast:**
  Breakfast must always include a fruit or vegetable. A meat or meat alternate may replace the grain component up to three times per week, but it cannot replace the required fruit or vegetable.
- **Claims submitted with pending enrollments:**
  We can only reimburse meals and snacks for children whose Enrollment Forms are in active status. Meals claimed while a child's enrollment is still pending cannot be reimbursed.
- **"School out" not recorded for school-age children:**
  If school-age children are claimed for a.m. snack and/or lunch, be sure the "school out" is recorded in KidKare.
- **Meals exceed licensed capacity:**
  Meals and snacks claimed must stay within your license capacity. If you receive a new license or variance, please send a copy to ACA before submitting your claim.
- **Claim submitted before the last meal or snack is served:**
  Meal counts must be completed after the meal or snack is served. For example, if you serve p.m. snack on the last day of the month, your claim should not be submitted earlier that day.

If you serve p.m. snack on the last day of the month, your claim should not be submitted earlier that day.

Taking a few extra moments to review these items each day after entering your food program records can help ensure you receive the full reimbursement you've earned. As always, if you have questions, we're happy to help!

Fiscal Year '27 Food Program Application

(Claim review procedures)

The CACFP is a federal program and runs on the federal fiscal year. The new fiscal year begins on October 1, 2026. During this visit, your food program application information (days of care, hours of care, meals service times) will be reviewed and updated if needed. This data is used to schedule home visit and to process your Food Program claims.

If your application data changes later in the fiscal year, please let ACA know in writing. You may send an email or a letter with the information.

Office Closed Dates

May 25 – Memorial Day
July 3 – Independence Day
September 7 – Labor Day

You may leave us an email, or a voice mail and we will get back to you on the next business day.

Email – cacfp@acainc.org
Phone – (651)481-9320

ACA's Drop Box

Enrollment forms and other documents can be mailed or dropped off in the white mailbox near the front door of our office. The address is:

Adults' & Children's Alliance
10 Yorkton Court
St. Paul, MN 55117

ACA is in Think Small's building. If you drop off documents, please remember to write ACA on the envelope to ensure your documents go to the correct organization. Do not put loose forms in the drop box.

In Fiscal Year 2024, approximately 4.4 million children received CACFP meals on snacks on an average day. Thank you for your participation.

Civil Rights Training for Family Day Care Home Providers FY '26

All providers and sponsor organization staff who interact with Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) participants must complete annual civil rights training. This program fact sheet addresses potential civil rights concerns and how to ensure that program benefits are made available to all eligible participants.

What is Discrimination?

Discrimination is the act of distinguishing one person or group of persons in the following way:

- Intentionally
- By neglect
- By the effect of actions, or lack of actions.

Discrimination is based on the six protected classes for CACFP including race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability.

Examples of Discrimination in CACFP

- Refuse a participant's enrollment based on disability.
- Failure to provide reasonable accommodations to disabled individuals.
- Serve meals at a time, place, or manner that is discriminatory.
- Selectively distribute Household Income Forms.
- Failure to provide the same eligibility criteria to all participants.

Key Points

1. Ask parents to complete racial/ethnic data for each enrolled child. This it to ensure compliance with federal civil rights laws, identify areas for improved program outreach, and assess if services are reaching all eligible beneficiaries fairly, as required by the USDA
2. All potentially eligible and current participants are to be informed of the benefits of CACFP and children enrolled in care must be allowed equal opportunities to participate.
3. All participants must be treated in the same manner (including seating arrangements, mealtimes and service, etc.).
4. Denial of a meal or meals as a disciplinary action against a participant is prohibited.
5. Overt identification or sharing of a child's eligibility status for Tier 1 meals is prohibited.
6. Reasonable steps must be taken to ensure that persons with limited English proficiency are able to access the CACFP.
7. If interpreters are needed, children should not be used as interpreters. Volunteer interpreters should be trained on confidentiality.
8. Reasonable accommodations must be made for children with disabilities to ensure their equal access to participate in CACFP. For example, alternative meals or meal components must be provided to children who have a special diet statement for a medical necessity.
9. Complaint procedures: Complaints may be filed based on race, color, national origin, age, sex, or disability. Never discourage individuals from filing complaints or voicing allegations of discrimination. To file a complaint, refer to the USDA Nondiscrimination and Complaint Procedure as outlined on the following page.
10. State agency will assess if sponsoring organization has implemented nondiscrimination and civil rights requirements.
11. Resolution of noncompliance: Stop inappropriate actions. Failure/refusal can result in loss of federal assistance.

Contact ACA if you have any questions.

Test Yourself!

Place a check mark by each situation where a civil rights violation has occurred.

The provider separates Spanish-speaking children to sit at a different table during meals and snacks.

Leftovers at the end of lunch are only offered to boys.

Children who have not cooperated at naptime are denied the afternoon snack.

The provider shares with their childcare parents which children are Tier 1 by income.

The provider has refused to supply nondairy milk for a child with an approved special diet statement.

The provider has a policy that children cannot be on the Food Program until their first birthday.

Always offer excellent customer service:

1. Be patient.
2. Be polite.
3. Avoid sarcasm.
4. Don't be afraid to apologize.
5. Treat others the way they want to be treated or at least be aware of what that is.

If a conflict occurs:

1. Remain calm.
2. Explain the situation.
3. Get help, especially if you feel threatened.
4. Use alternative dispute resolution techniques, such as mediation, when necessary.

It is also important to convey equal opportunity in messaging and interactions with participants. This includes using inclusive, respectful, and culturally sensitive language. For example, it is more respectful to put the person first. Instead of saying "a disabled person", use the phrase "a person with a disability". When in doubt, just ask someone who is more familiar with the preferred terminology.

For more information go to:
https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/FNS/CivilRight/

Nondiscrimination statement:

In accordance with federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex (including gender identity and sexual orientation), disability, age, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity.
Program information may be made available in languages other than English. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication to obtain program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language), should contact the responsible state or local agency that administers the program or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339.
To file a program discrimination complaint, a Complainant should complete a Form AD-3027, USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form which can be obtained online at: https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ad-3027.pdf, from any USDA office, by calling (866) 632-9992, or by writing a letter addressed to USDA. The letter must contain the complainant's name, address, telephone number, and a written description of the alleged discriminatory action in sufficient detail to inform the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (ASCR) about the nature and date of an alleged civil rights violation. The completed AD-3027 form or letter must be submitted to USDA by:
(1) **mail:** U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; or
(2) **fax:** (833) 256-1665 or (202) 690-7442; or
(3) **email:** program.intake@usda.gov
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