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CONTACT: D'Anelle Desire
Director of Communications
Tennessee Justice Center
ddesire@tnjustice.org

Response From Governor Lee's Office is Inaccurate and Misguided

Nashville, TN, Jan. 7, 2026 – Despite months of public outcry for Summer EBT, Governor Lee's office has only just commented on Tennessee's participation in the program today.

"The Summer EBT program was established in the pandemic-era to supplement existing food assistance programs and is mostly duplicative," spokesperson Elizabeth Lane Johnson said in a statement. "As a greater share of the cost burden shifts to states, Tennessee is well-positioned to ensure children are fed in the summer months by bolstering our existing programs."

The Governor's office is incorrect for three reasons:

1. Summer EBT was [created by USDA as a pilot program in 2011](#) to address summer hunger, which has been a problem for low-income families long before the Covid-19 pandemic. [Tennessee participated as a pilot back in 2018](#) and participated alongside all states during the pandemic. Tennessee was one of the first states in the Southeast to participate after Congress made S-EBT a permanent program in 2024.
2. Summer EBT is not duplicative. While the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) provide kids meals while school is out and are valuable, they do not have the reach that Summer EBT does because they require parents and children to eat or at least visit a meal site in person to get food. In 2023 the programs combined [only reached 64,000 Tennessee children](#) on an average day in July according to the yearly national report vs the **700,000 Tennessee children** that Summer EBT reached in 2024.
3. The state administrative cost share to operate Summer EBT is not increasing. In fact, Tennessee estimated that the administrative cost would have been less in 2025.

States continue to be responsible for 50% of the administrative cost, while the federal government pays the remaining cost and the total EBT benefit amount. In 2024, the federal government provided **\$84 million in funding** that went direct to families who had 3 months to spend the dollars in local TN grocery stores. The administrative cost to Tennessee was around \$5 million.

Elected officials, parents, community organizations, faith leaders, and others have strongly urged the Governor to opt into the program for 2026.

- 41 county mayors
- 18 organizations across Tennessee
- 308 faith leaders
- 182 individuals

Summer EBT provides \$120 to children during the summer who are enrolled in free or reduced-price meals during the school year. Though a modest amount, the benefits go a long way in bridging the gap when school lunch is not available.

The first deadline of January 1, 2026, has passed without an intent to apply expressed by the Governor. However, the final state S-EBT plan is due to USDA by February 15, 2026, so the Governor can still opt into the program to feed 700,000 Tennessee children.

In comparison, in 2025, Tennessee declined federal participation and instead operated a significantly smaller, state-only pilot that reached just over 18,000 children across 15 rural counties. In 2024, Summer EBT provided food support to more than 700,000 Tennessee children, and those families spent those dollars in local grocery stores across Tennessee. With grocery prices continuing to rise and federal food bank funding reduced, coalition partners are calling for a return to the federal model, which reaches far more children while requiring a comparable investment from the state.

Without school meals during the summertime, many children face hunger. Summer EBT would help families feed their children at a time when hunger and family expenses increase.

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About Tennessee Justice Center / www.tnjustice.org For over 30 years, the Tennessee Justice Center has been standing with vulnerable Tennessee families and helping them access basic necessities of life. Since opening our doors in 1996, TJC has used lawsuits, legislation and coalition building to overcome injustice, winning \$2 billion in health care and hundreds of millions in financial and nutrition assistance for Tennesseans. Aside from

lawsuits, TJC helps assist seniors and other individuals with TennCare, SNAP and other public benefit programs.