Office of the Food Security Advocate

Measuring Student Participation in School Meals (MSPSM)

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

November 20, 2026

Proposals Due: January 15, 2027 at 5pm ET

Contents

Background & Purpose **3**

Program Overview **4**

Available Funding 4

Eligible Projects 4

Eligibility Information 6

Allowable Expenses 7

Grantee Requirements **8**

Proposal Submission Information **10**

Proposal Content Requirements 10

Selection Process 12

Scoring Rubric 12

Appendix A. **13**

Background & Purpose

In January 2024, an expansion of the Working-Class Families Anti-Hunger Act (aka New Jersey Expanded Income Eligibility – NJEIE) further expanded access to free school meals for students attending schools enrolled in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Specifically, it raised the eligibility threshold from 199% of the Federal Poverty Limit (FPL) to 224% FPL. The original law initially increased the threshold from the federal standard of 185% FPL.

Analysis of school meals data by the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA) has shown that school districts are approving NJEIE applications among eligible households as anticiapted. However, among those determined to be eligible under NJEIE, rates of daily participation in both the School Breakfast Program and NSLP remain low with less than 10% of NJEIE-eligible students participating in lunch and less than 5% in breakfast.

Challenges with school meals participation are not unique to NJEIE-eligible students. A review of data including school meal counts and eligibility data from school years (SY) 2023-2024, 2024-2025, 2025-2026 finds that school meal participation ranges from extremely low rates of participation to upwards of almost 100% participation in several of the state's non-public school sites.

In speaking with parents, students, and school personnel, there are multiple areas of concern that contribute to lower rates of participation, including meal quality, meal delivery models, time allocated to school meal periods, unique dietary and medical needs, inadequate facilities, and concerns around bias specific to students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

In February 2026, the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA) released the New Jersey Food Security Strategic Plan.

Focus Area 4 promotes cross-sector, client-centered approaches to alleviate barriers to understanding, applying for, and participating in programs. It promotes simplifying applications, enhancing digital access, and improving customer service. It advances coordinated referral systems and shared outreach infrastructure to further strengthen the ability of healthcare, workforce, and housing partners to connect people to benefits. State level leadership and interagency coordination are critical to scaling these changes and ensuring sustained improvements positively impact all implementation levels.

Focus Area 1 which identified enhanced information exchange and access to improve public awareness, optimize programs, and support data-driven decision-making. This Focus Area promotes data infrastructure and advances a coordinated, data-informed approach to food security by strengthening how information is collected, shared,

visualized, and applied across sectors. It promotes coordination among agencies and supports the development of community-facing data tools with localized analyses that illustrate the economic, health, and lived impacts of food insecurity in New Jersey.

To address challenges in school meals participation and In support of advancing both Strategic Plan focus areas, OFSA is launching the **Measuring Student Participation in School Meals (MSPSM)** research grant to identify a research institution that will provide insight and data specific to school meal participation beyond the anecdotal data shared prior. The selected institution will develop and pilot a measure of the barriers to school meal participation resulting is a statewide report/report card providing data and guidance to the state, school districts, and school feeding authorities (SFAs).

Intended outcomes from implementing strategies within this focus area include:

- A measure of school meal participation and frequency based on total enrollment as well as eligibility for free/reduced price meals
- An identification of primary and secondary inhibitors to school meal participation along with their corresponding prevalence
- Specific to school meals, measure the perceived quality of school meals including visual appeal, taste, aroma/smell, and overall appeal. Measures should include a sample of students from Fifth-Twelfth grades
- Identification of implicit and implied forms of bias in the school cafeteria setting along with a measure of prevalence and impact on students
- Identification of best practices in support of expanded school meal participation identifying and highlighting high-performing schools/school districts/SFAs
- Preparation of a strategic report summarizing results including recommendations informed by this work that OFSA can use to fulfill its legislative mandate around school meals

Program Overview

Available Funding

A total of $300,000 is available for MSPSM. Funding will be awarded through a Request for Proposals (RFP) process. There is no cost sharing or matching requirement for funds. The project period will begin approximately March 1, 2027, with project periods extending up to 24 calendar months. Timeline may be subject to change.

Grantee Responsibilities

In applying for funding as part of this research with OFSA, the grantee agrees to:

- Utilization of the grantee's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval of the research
    - OFSA will serve as an External Co-Investigator

- Data will be jointly owned by OFSA and grantee up to completion of the statewide report along with its distribution and addition to OFSA's data catalogue. At that time, ownership of all data will be solely with the grantee.
- As part of the RFP, grantee needs to describe how the initial data may be built upon including future research and programmatic work. This includes defining any further role envisioned for OFSA understanding that additional funding will be the responsibility of the grantee.
- In submitting a proposal, applicant agrees to abide by all State of New Jersey Standard Terms and Conditions.

Eligible Projects

Projects must address the intended outcomes outlined in the Background and Purpose. Projects must also directly advance focus areas 1 or 4 of the New Jersey Food Security Strategic Plan

Focus area one seeks to enhance information exchange and access to improve public awareness, optimize programs, and support data-driven decision-making as one of the primary focus areas. This Focus Area promotes data infrastructure and advances a coordinated, data-informed approach to food security by strengthening how information is collected, shared, visualized, and applied across sectors. It promotes coordination among agencies and supports the development of community-facing data tools with localized analyses that illustrate the economic, health, and lived impacts of food insecurity in New Jersey.

Projects/research will address one or more of the following strategies:

- **Data Coordination:** Coordinate state agencies across sectors to make existing food security–related data available across programs, voluntarily and where possible.
- **Impact Analysis and Research:** Conduct analyses on the health and economic impacts of food insecurity and research the effectiveness and cost-benefit of food security initiatives and policies.
- **Data Visualization and Dissemination:** Invest in coordinated, intuitive, asset-based data dashboards and visualization tools that can be customized to support community initiatives.

Focus area four promotes collaboration across sectors and state agencies to streamline and strengthen federal and state food security–related program access and delivery. This focus area promotes cross-sector, client-centered approaches to alleviate barriers to understanding, applying for, and participating in programs. It promotes simplifying

applications, enhancing digital access, and improving customer service. It advances coordinated referral systems and shared outreach infrastructure to further strengthen the ability of healthcare, workforce, and housing partners to connect people to benefits. State level leadership and interagency coordination are critical to scaling these changes and ensuring sustained improvements positively impact all implementation levels.

Projects/research will address one or more of the following strategies:

- **Public Benefit User Experience:** Implement locally tailored improvements in accessibility, user experience, and dignity in benefit enrollment and recertification processes through simplified applications, technology advancements, digital access, and client centered service design.
- **Program Opportunities to Enhance Participation:** Protect and leverage federal and state funding and policy options to expand outreach efforts, modernize and streamline enrollment processes, and maximize benefits.
- **Federal Nutrition Program Outreach and Referrals:** Implement comprehensive outreach and referral initiatives to connect individuals with state- and county-administered federal nutrition programs.
- **State-Level Interagency Work Group(s):** Create state-level interagency work group(s) focused on protecting, aligning, coordinating, and streamlining federal, state, county, and local food security programs, and their administrative processes, definitions, regulations, and policies, where able.
- **Cross-Sector Coordination, Training, and Resources:** Provide coordination, cross-program training, interconnected digital platforms, and other resources to support staff across workforce development, Medicaid, housing, transportation, public health programs, and food assistance programs to provide client-centered, comprehensive services.

Explore Appendix A for expanded descriptions of each of these strategies.

Eligibility Information

Eligible Applicants

Eligible MSPSM applicants include:

- **Colleges and Universities:** US-based research colleges and universities, both public and private institutions. Preference will be given to institutions based in the State of New Jersey.

- **Research Organizations:** US-based agencies that specialize in conducting qualitative and quantitative research specific to the social sciences with preference given to agencies that have done work with both state and federal agencies. Preference will be given to New Jersey-based research institutions.

Applicants must be physically located and operate in the United States.

Proposals will be evaluated in part on the extent to which the project aligns with intended outcomes, and/or identifies an opportunity to enhance the impact of this work. Further, the RFP will be evaluated based on the vision and direction for future work in the sector.

Eligibility Restrictions

The following entities are ineligible for funding:

- Local, state, and federal agencies, departments, or offices including State of New Jersey
- Institutions who serve a closed group, or otherwise limited constituencies
- Institutions whose missions and visions do not align with those of OFSA
- Institutions that lack an internal IRB
- Institutions that do not advance diversity, equity and inclusion within their faculty, staff, and student body

Allowable Expenses

Budgets can include direct costs related to personnel, contractors, equipment, meeting expenses, travel, postage, incentives for study participants, training specific to the operationalization of the grant, and partner subawards/regrants. Direct costs are costs specific to the grant itself and do not include costs associated with operating the institution/business. All applicants will be limited to no more than 10 percent allowed on indirect costs. Additional Information on allowable expenses is outlined below:

- Equipment (i.e., items of personal property having a useful life of more than one year and a cost of $5,000 or more) that are purchased using MSPSM funds must be used during the grant period for the sole purpose of accomplishing the stated project objectives. The project must reflect appropriate equipment depreciation or request depreciation flexibility. If purchased equipment is not fully dedicated to the grant project, including extension beyond the grant period end date, the applicant must determine what percentage of the equipment's time or space will be dedicated to project activities when developing a budget.
- At any time, during or after the Grant Period, if OFSA determines any equipment purchased using these grant funds are no longer being used in alignment with the purposes of this program, or have been sold, OFSA may demand that the

property or funds be returned. All property associated with this grant program are purchased using funds from OFSA and are therefore property of OFSA.
- Travel costs should be limited to mileage and paid at the prevailing IRS rate. Any travel costs beyond mileage must have a justification. A grantee cannot take both actual costs and mileage. It must be one or the other.
- Funds may only be expended during the grant period of performance. Any unspent funds at grant period end must be returned to OFSA within fifteen (15) business days of grant end date.
- Partner subawards/regrants must be spent down by the end of the grant period.

Budgets may not include:

- Supplies (e.g., office supplies for general use)
- Travel expenses not related to research activities, including conference-related travel
- Reimbursement for pre-award costs
- Lobbying or advocacy
- Competitive sub-grant process

Grantee Requirements

Project Monitoring and Reporting

OFSA and grantee will conduct a quarterly project meeting to provide updates specific to this research, shares achievements and challenges, and discuss on-going results. This may include any proposed modifications to the research including changes to the research protocol, consent, or solicitation material. Additional meetings can be scheduled at the request of either OFSA or the grantee should either identify a need.

Grantees will submit three brief narrative project reports after the first six, twelve, and eighteen months of the work along with a final project report at the conclusion of the funding period exclusive of the statewide report. Copies of all materials (e.g., educational, promotional, interview guides, data collection) developed as a part of this research will be delivered as part of the final statewide report.

OFSA will provide templates for all four narrative reports and will work collaboratively with the grantee on the statewide report.

Note: While not a part of the reporting requirement, grantee will be allowed and encouraged to document results of this work in a peer-reviewed journal. OFSA will require prior review and approval prior to submission and publication.

Financial Reporting

MSPSM will be administered by the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA) with support from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA) fiscal team. Grantees are required to track monthly expenses and retain receipts, which must be made available upon request. Grantees are required to submit quarterly financial reports using templates and guidance provided. Documentation must be retained for three years from the date of submission of the final financial report. All reports are subject to audit from OFSA, NJDA, or the state's Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Grantees should prepare all reports with the expectation that an audit will occur at some point over the grant period.

Participation in Overarching Evaluation

All grantees will be required to participate in an overarching evaluation of the research grant program led by OFSA. The evaluation is designed to be streamlined, supportive, and minimally burdensome for grantees, and is intended to inform continuous improvement and statewide learning rather than assess individual grantee performance.

OFSA will conduct the majority of evaluation activities using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data. Evaluation activities will focus on both process and outcome metrics and will primarily include brief surveys and facilitated focus group or interview discussions.

Grantee participation may include:

- Completing short surveys related to program implementation and outcomes;
- Participating in interviews or focus groups conducted by OFSA or its evaluation partners; and
- Providing relevant administrative or programmatic data when available and applicable.

OFSA will provide clear guidance, standardized tools, and reasonable timelines for all evaluation activities. Evaluation expectations will be proportionate to grant size and scope, and grantees will not be responsible for designing or conducting independent evaluations. Findings will be used to strengthen future investments, elevate effective practices, and support shared learning across the field.

Proposal Submission Information

Proposals Due: January 15, 2027, at 5pm ET
Questions Due: December 21, 2026, at 5pm ET
Question Answers Posted to Funding Opportunities' page: January 4, 2027
Initiative Term: Two years, to commence approximately March 1, 2027, upon approval from OFSA. Timeline may be subject to change.

All interested applicants should submit a completed MSPSM proposal including an itemized budget, budget narrative, and Risk Assessment form (Risk Assessment download) in a single (combined) PDF file to ofsa@ag.nj.gov by January 15, 2027 at 5pm ET. Use the email subject line, "MSPSM Proposal" when submitting the proposal. Incomplete or late proposal will not be accepted.

For questions about this funding opportunity, please contact OFSA at ofsa@ag.nj.gov. In accordance with state policies, all questions received by December 21, 2026 will be answered by January 4, 2027 and available to all interested applicants via a link on OFSA's Funding Opportunities page.

Proposal Content Requirements

The following information should be incorporated into the proposal as outlined below.

Section 1. Applicant Information

- Applicant Institution Information and Description
    - If multiple departments within an institution are applying, ensure description is specific to applicant's department
- Primary Contact/Investigator
- Budget Manager Contact

Section 2. Summary of Proposed Companion Research

- A summary overview of the proposed research, goals, and alignment with intended research outcomes.
- Research/Project title
- Duration
- The strategy area under Focus Area One or Four most aligned with the proposed research including a justification.

Section 3. Project Need & Community Assets

- Specific need this project will address among New Jersey school students
- Community resources or assets that inform the project

- How the project advances equity for communities disproportionately impacted by food insecurity within the state

Section 4. Research Design

- Alignment with the New Jersey Food Security Strategic Plan Focus 1 or 4
- Specific tactic and objectives
- Planned activities, roles, and timeline
- Project team members (including an abbreviated CV for each member)
- Community engagement in the planning and implementation of the project
- Summary of how this proposed research supports longer term sustainability of food security research within this population and the longer-term vision of the grantee post grant period

Section 5. Project Learnings/Future Vision

- Plans for analyzing and disseminating results of this research beyond the statewide report
- Grantee's long-term vision for this work
    - Overall strategy and targeted methodologies/models
    - Proposed timeline
    - Goals, both short- and long-term
    - Describe OFSA's desired role, if any
- Plans for how learnings will be incorporated into grantee's longer-term vision for food security work with this population
- Acknowledgement of compliance with grantee requirements
    - Please include the following statement in your proposal to acknowledge these requirements: *"[Enter lead applicant organization name here] and our project partners will participate in required reporting and evaluation activities*."

Section 6. Budget

- Itemized budget
- Budget narrative

Section 7. Risk Assessment Form (download the Risk Assessment form here)

- Organization funding and accounting information

Selection Process

- Following an initial screening process for confirmation of the applicant organization's eligibility, OFSA will review and determine the technical merits of each proposal.
- Reviewers will independently score each proposal based on the criteria outlined in the Scoring Rubric section.
- OFSA will require all reviewers to sign a conflict of interest and confidentiality form to prevent any actual or perceived conflicts of interest that may affect the proposal review and evaluation process.
- Award notifications will be delivered to applicants via email up to four weeks after the RFP due date.
    - OFSA reserves the right to partially fund a grant proposal based on number of qualifying submissions, available funds, and proposal score.

Scoring Rubric

Point Value (out of 100)	Proposal Scoring
3 Points	Section 1. Applicant Information
20 Points	Section 2. Summary of Proposed Companion Research
10 Points	Section 3. Project Need & Community Assets
30 Points	Section 4. Research Design ● 4.1 Strategic Plan Alignment - 2 Points ● 4.2 Project Tactic and Objectives - 8 Points ● 4.3 Project Activities, Roles, & Timeline - 8 Points ● 4.4 Project Team Members - 2 Points ● 4.5 Community Engagement - 5 Points ● 4.6 Longer term Vision - 5 Points
20 Points	Section 5. Project Learnings/Future Work
15 Points	Section 6. Budget ● 6.1 Itemized Budget - 5 Points ● 6.2 Budget Narrative Justification - 10 Points
2 Points	Section 7. Risk Assessment

Appendix A.

New Jersey Food Security 3-Year Strategic Plan

Focus Area 1: Enhance Information Exchange and Access to Improve Public Awareness, Optimize Programs, and Support Data-Driven Decision-Making

FOCUS AREA 1 | STRATEGY 1

***Data Coordination**: Coordinate state agencies across sectors to make existing food security–related data available across programs, voluntarily and where possible.*

This strategy supports the development of a voluntary, coordinated, cross-agency/organization data infrastructure to improve data collection, tracking, analysis, and program responsiveness. By aligning definitions of terms and measures, establishing formal data-sharing agreements, and developing common indicators of food security across state programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, education, childcare, employment, charitable food, family services, and housing), New Jersey can improve its ability to identify food insecurity trends and related factors, which can be useful to inform real-time decision-making. An interagency governance framework and accompanying shared data inventory can help agencies work together as peers, co-developing an understanding of who is being served, where gaps exist, and how systems can operate more efficiently together toward shared, positive outcomes. Enhance transparency by sharing data collection methods and providing de-identified, aggregate data publicly while preserving individual data privacy.

FOCUS AREA 1 | STRATEGY 2

***Impact Analysis and Research:** Conduct analyses on the health and economic impacts of food insecurity and research the effectiveness and cost-benefit of food security initiatives and policies.*

Quantifying the impacts of food insecurity, especially on health and healthcare costs, educational, developmental, and economic outcomes, and across all life stages, can provide crucial information to help drive investment and policy change. This strategy promotes partnerships with researchers, healthcare systems, and public agencies to estimate the costs of food insecurity and the return on investment in addressing it. An example that includes evaluating the impacts associated with food is medicine programs (e.g., produce prescriptions, medically tailored groceries). Findings should be translated into plain language and used to inform program design, public awareness, and advocacy.

FOCUS AREA 1 | STRATEGY 3

Data Visualization and Dissemination: *Invest in coordinated, intuitive, asset-based data dashboards and visualization tools that can be customized to support community initiatives.*

Community-facing dashboards can be developed through an optional opt-in model with data from state agencies (and other entities with access to relevant data), supporting data transparency and accountability. These tools can make data actionable by translating complex information into visually appealing, accessible tools that provide information for data-driven and effective program planning, policy advocacy, and funding applications, while protecting individual privacy and data confidentiality. This strategy supports investment in a shared, multi-sector, interactive dashboard that maps food insecurity trends, highlights community assets, and integrates program data from multiple sectors. Tools can be co-designed with community-based organizations to ensure usability and relevance and paired with training or mini-grants to support local implementation when possible.

Focus Area 4: Collaborate Across Sectors and State Agencies to Streamline and Strengthen Federal and State Food Security–Related Program Access and Delivery

FOCUS AREA 4 | STRATEGY 1

Public Benefit User Experience*: Implement locally tailored improvements in accessibility, user experience, and dignity of benefit enrollment and recertification processes through simplified applications, technology advancements, digital access, and client-centered service design.*

This strategy focuses on redesigning application and renewal systems to reduce paperwork, eliminate redundancies, and improve user friendliness. Examples include mobile-friendly portals, auto-populated forms for clients already enrolled in other programs, and real-time application status tracking. It also calls for human centered design improvements, such as plain language forms and data collection limited to what is essential for program operations. This can help entities meet individual needs of clients with respectful, trauma-informed customer service.

FOCUS AREA 4 | STRATEGY 2

Program Opportunities to Enhance Participation*: Protect and leverage federal and state funding and policy options to expand outreach efforts, modernize and streamline enrollment processes, and maximize benefits.*

This strategy ensures that New Jersey takes full advantage of state and federal opportunities to expand access to food benefit programs. This includes using USDA

administrative, healthcare, and other funding streams to reduce access gaps. It also encourages the use of state flexibilities and options to maximize eligibility, simplify renewals, and support coordinated outreach and awareness efforts on existing resources with trusted community partners. This approach can include pursuing modifications to state-level policies to allow WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program benefits to be accepted at mobile markets.

FOCUS AREA 4 | STRATEGY 3

Federal Nutrition Program Outreach and Referrals*: Implement comprehensive outreach and referral initiatives to connect individuals with state- and county-administered federal nutrition programs.*

This strategy supports a coordinated outreach infrastructure that connects residents with federal nutrition programs. It includes building referral partnerships with healthcare providers, workforce programs, and local governments; training staff across sectors on benefit eligibility; and deploying navigators who can assist with enrollment in multiple programs. Outreach can be tailored to the local community and co-developed with trusted community organizations.

FOCUS AREA 4 | STRATEGY 4

State-level Interagency Work Group(s)*: Create state-level interagency work group(s) focused on protecting, aligning, coordinating, and streamlining federal, state, county, and local food security programs, and their administrative processes, definitions, regulations, and policies, where able.*

This strategy proposes forming statewide, cross-agency work group(s) to identify and address policy, administrative, and regulatory barriers that hinder access to food security programs. While continuing to operate within federal regulations and policies, the work group(s) could focus on items such as educating on/advocating for supportive policy, streamlining applications, maximizing eligibility options, simplifying reporting requirements, and identifying opportunities for shared infrastructure (e.g., intake systems, data platforms). Participation could include program administrators, frontline staff, and community representatives across counties to ensure solutions reflect lived expertise and operational realities.

FOCUS AREA 4 | STRATEGY 5

Cross-sector Coordination, Training, and Resources: *Provide coordination, cross-program training, interconnected digital platforms, and other resources to support staff across workforce development, Medicaid, housing, transportation, public health programs, and food assistance programs to provide client-centered, comprehensive services.*

Individuals experiencing food insecurity often face concurrent challenges related to housing, healthcare, employment, and other areas. This strategy focuses on equipping staff within and across sectors with the knowledge, tools, and coordination needed to provide holistic, client centered support. It includes offering cross program training to help client-facing staff understand the full range of benefits and services available, including any recent changes to policy, how to help people understand their program benefits and eligibility, and how to make effective referrals. Interconnected digital platforms (e.g., referral directories, shared toolkits, or online portals) can further streamline service delivery. By supporting staff across systems, this strategy helps reduce fragmentation and ensures that individuals and families receive comprehensive and timely support, while retaining their confidentiality.

For a full description of Focus Area 1 and 4, please see the New Jersey Food Security Strategic Plan.