

Caregivers Access and Responsible Expansion (CARE) for Kids Act of 2024 **Representatives Jahana Hayes (CT-05), Deborah Ross (NC-02), and Don Bacon (NE-02)**

As of September 2023, over 2.4 million children in the U.S. are being raised by grandparents and other relatives. There is a long history of relatives stepping in to care for children when parents are unable, but experts believe these numbers continue to climb due to the current opioid epidemic. For many grandparents and relatives who have taken on the important responsibility of raising children affected, the financial burden of taking on this care can be substantial. The School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs can provide critical support to reduce household food costs and can help ease the financial burden on caregivers who have taken on the important responsibility of raising. Yet, in some cases, the income of the grandparents or caregivers, even relatively modest income, can keep these children from qualifying for free school meals.

School meal programs provide automatic eligibility and certification for free meals for children in foster care. However, the law fails to authorize these enrollment and eligibility procedures for similar groups of vulnerable children, such as those placed in alternative or informal care arrangements, including children living with other relatives due to the impact of opioids or other drugs on their families.

To support these children and the families who have generously taken on the financial burden of caring for them, the ***CARE for Kids Act of 2024*** builds on existing school meal eligibility for foster care by ensuring that local education agencies (LEAs), including the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools, have the option to provide automatic eligibility and certification to the following children:

Children Cared for by a Relative Who Receives Adoption or Guardianship Assistance

While children in foster care are categorically eligible for free meals, children who are placed in more stable, long-term caregiving arrangements are not. Providing automatic eligibility for children who are placed in permanent guardianship or who are adopted out of foster care would ease the burden on the families who have taken on caring for them, such as grandparents.

Children Cared for by Grandparents or Other Relatives Due to Placement by a State or Tribal Child Welfare Agency

Child welfare agencies frequently use relatives to divert children from foster care and often use relative placements to ensure children have a way to leave foster care. This provision ensures that children directed out of foster care into stable placements can still access free meals without the welfare agency's involvement.

Children Living in "Grandfamily" Housing or Receiving Housing Assistance under the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act of 1996

Children with unstable living conditions may be determined categorically eligible for free meals through the assistance of a homeless or runaway liaison in the school district. This provision allows a child living in a housing development dedicated to low-income families with a grandparent or other older relative caregiver or in a development receiving affordable housing assistance under NAHASDA to be determined categorically eligible.

Children Automatically Eligible for Free Meals through Medicaid Participation, but Are Not Able To Be Certified

Some children who are automatically eligible for Medicaid, such as children formerly in foster care or children with a disability, do not have an income verification completed for them to receive Medicaid benefits. Without income verification, LEAs are unable to directly certify a child, although the child is categorically eligible for free meals. This provision would fix this issue, allowing all children deemed categorically through Medicaid participation to have access to free meals.

Extends Eligibility for Children Already Receiving Reduced or Free Meals Placed under the Care of a Grandparent or Other Relative

The year immediately following a child's placement with a grandparent or other relative is often disruptive and challenging for the child and caregivers, with new financial obligations for the relatives caring for the child. For children who were already receiving reduced or free meals prior to their placement with a grandparent or other relative, this provision allows for the extension of their eligibility for an additional year, ensuring continuity and support for health meal access during the time of transition.