**SUN Bucks Advocate Webinar**

0:05
Hello, good afternoon.

0:08
This is Carl with the Department of Human Services.

0:10
We'll be getting started in several minutes.

0:13
Thank you.

1:55
Hello.

1:55
Good afternoon.

1:56
This is Carl.

1:57
We'll be getting started in a minute.

1:59
Thank you.

2:43
Hello and good afternoon.

2:45
This is Carl Feldman, and we're going to get started with our discussion today.

2:51
I am the Director of the Bureau of Policy with the Office of Income Maintenance.

2:56
We're glad to have you here with us to talk about an important child nutrition program.

3:02
This is the Sun Bucks program, Pennsylvania's summer electronic benefit transfer.

3:09
And thank you in advance to Brenna Ludwig, who is running the slides for us with our Office of Policy Development.

3:17
We will be discussing a number of things today about the Sun Box program and we'll take some questions at the end.

3:24
So if you would kindly hold them or or put them in the chat, we would appreciate that, but I will not be addressing them until the end of the call.

3:33
All right.

3:37
Just as a reminder, because this is the second year for which Pennsylvania has operated the Sun Bucks program.

3:45
This was authorized by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 as a new permanent summer nutrition program.

3:54
It is not affiliated with the former pandemic EBT program.

3:59
It is a separate program with a separate authorization and operates slightly differently.

4:07
It is first and foremost a child nutrition program.

4:10
The majority of child nutrition programs in Pennsylvania are run through the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

4:16
The Sunbox program is operated as a partnership between DHS and PDE, and we work together to make sure that the kids receive the benefits over the summer.

4:26
Next slide please.

4:31
So like last year, Sunbox will provide a $40.00 for each summer month benefit and that works out to be a single $120.00 benefit per eligible child.

4:46
So no one will receive less than or more than that single benefit amount and households will receive that on a per child basis.

4:58
And you can think about that benefit as being basically the same as the supplemental Nutritional Assistance program.

5:06
If you can purchase something with SNAP, you can purchase it with Sunbox.

5:10
Next slide please.

5:16
So I think this is one of the challenging aspects of the Sunbox programs.

5:23
We want to make sure that we take some time to talk through the ways in which a child becomes eligible to receive Sunbox.

5:32
There are children that are automatically eligible, and they can be automatically eligible through several different means.

5:42
The first of which is known as direct certification.

5:45
And direct certification occurs when we have information in our income eligibility system for other programs that confers them as eligible for the National School Lunch Program.

5:58
So if they are eligible through direct certification, they would have to be aged 6 through 18 and enrolled in a school that does in fact participate in the National School Lunch Program.

6:12
They would be receiving TANF or SNAP or certain categories of Medicaid.

6:20
Categories of Medicaid which do not count are PH-95 program, program for children with special needs and and CHIP.

6:29
They do not qualify for direct certification.

6:32
There's a separate method of automatic eligibility in which a child who is participating in an NSLP school and applied for and was determined eligible for free and reduced price meals or they're in that NSLP school and they meet the status of foster child, runaway, migrant, homeless or are participating in Head Start.

6:57
We call this automatic eligibility because if they meet this criteria, we will confer the eligibility for them automatically and they will receive the benefit automatically along with associated correspondence and notices.

7:13
The final method by which someone can receive Sunbox is through applying for Sunbox on a Sunbox application.

7:21
I mean, we'll have more information about that in a minute.

7:24
Next slide please.

7:29
Because of the challenges around making sure that everybody understands how someone can be eligible and the fact that we don't want people to unnecessarily need to take the time to apply for Sunbox if it's really not necessary, we want to point out that there is a small group of children who likely must apply for Sunbox if they want to receive it.

7:54
These children attended a school that participates in the National School Lunch Program.

7:59
They didn't receive Tana for SNAP or have a Medicaid category that confers eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, and they didn't apply for free and Rudy's price meals through the National School Lunch Program.

8:13
And they don't meet that status of being a foster child, homeless, migrant or runaway.

8:18
It's very important to remember that if a child was not enrolled in a school that participates in the NSLP, they cannot qualify for Son Box through an application.

8:28
Next slide please.

8:33
Students receiving free and reduced price meals at Community eligibility provision schools will not be automatically eligible for Sun Box unless they meet one of the other automated eligibility criteria.

8:47
Those being received a SNAP or TANF one of the direct certifying conferred Medicaid categories or that status of homeless foster child, runaway or migrant Community Eligibility Provision schools is the term given to schools in which the school provides National School lunch program to all of the attending children without the need for an application.

9:12
Next slide please.

9:22
All right, so let's talk about how a child receives the benefit of the child's household receives the Sun Bucks benefit if they're eligible and that household already has an EBT card for SNAP and TANF, We're going to attempt to put the benefit for the child onto that SNAP account.

9:43
If the child's eligible for Sun Bucks and they received the Sun Bucks card in the previous year, the benefits will be issued on that previous year Sun Bucks card.

9:54
If a child is eligible for Sunbox through Medicaid eligibility and they are not receiving Snapper TANF, that means they don't have an EBT card, they only have a Medicaid card.

10:04
Potentially, the benefits going to be loaded onto a Sunbox card and then sent the address associated with the Medicaid case.

10:13
If the child is eligible for Sunbox based on information submitted by the child's school, the benefit will be loaded onto a Sunbox card and sent to the address provided by that school.

10:25
If a child is eligible for Sunbox through an application they submitted, the benefit will be loaded onto a Sunbox card and sent to the address on the Sunbox application.

10:36
And before we get into when those issuances will occur, I think it's important to know that generally speaking, the way in which a child's eligibility is conferred is how we will determine to where the benefit will be sent.

10:50
As a good general rule for your understanding of this program, we anticipate that that benefit will be sent in mid-july with all benefits including those based on direct application for Sunbox being issued by October.

11:08
So this is a little bit earlier than we were able to issue benefits in the previous year and that's our hope that in following year we will be able to issue benefits even earlier in the summer operational period than mid-july.

11:23
Next slide, please want to spend some time talking about the application for Sunbox, the direct Sunbox application.

11:35
These must be submitted to a local county assistance office.

11:39
If it's paper application, we are happy to share that there will be an online application available in mid-july.

11:47
We don't have an exact date to share with you at this time, but we do intend to have an online application available for this year.

11:56
Generally, the income limit for Sunbox is 185% of the federal poverty level.

12:01
We want you to know that immigration status is not an eligibility factor for the Sunbox program and like other child nutrition programs, client self attestation of income and household composition can be accepted.

12:16
It's necessary for us to verify school enrollment and the application must be signed.

12:24
Next slide please to give you some more information about how we would handle these applications.

12:33
These are the circumstances under which an application we receive will be rejected.

12:38
It might be rejected because the child is already receiving Sun Bucks through one of the other means of eligibility that we described previously.

12:47
If the child is not enrolled in a school that provides pre and reduced price meals through the National School lunch program.

12:55
If the household is over the income limit and if the application is not signed, the application will be rejected.

13:02
And these applications should be processed by our workers within 15 days.

13:07
Next slide please.

13:14
For the Sun Box program, because it is a child nutrition program, applications are processed when they're received within that 15 day.

13:27
And for most of them, because we can accept self attestation, they're not to be pended.

13:37
It may be the case that if there's some kind of conflicting information on the application compared to what the state already has available to it, we would need to conduct a process known as verification for clause.

13:50
This would apply only to those children that are eligible through an application that they submitted for the Sun Box program.

13:58
And this will result in the worker sending a letter to the household saying that there's conflicting information and that that it conflicting information needs to be resolved.

14:10
And if it is, the benefit will be released.

14:14
And if not, the benefit will be rejected because the child would not be eligible and the conflicting information demonstrates that.

14:24
Next slide, please.

14:30
This is one of the new program elements for 2025.

14:37
States are federally required to verify up to 3% of all approved applications received prior to the start of the summer operational period.

14:47
The summer operational period will initiate June, July and August.

14:56
And what we will do is we will select 3% of all the applications received prior to that.

15:04
And then we're going to indicate to the workers that process those applications.

15:08
These again are the direct summer EBT applications that they require this 3% verification.

15:17
It's from a process standpoint very similar to the verification for cause request.

15:26
A pending letter goes out and if information verifying the income of the household is provided, we release the benefit and if not, we are to reject the benefit and the child would be considered not eligible at that time.

15:42
They could of course apply again.

15:44
Next slide.

15:50
So here's an overview of the program time frame to the best of our ability.

15:56
Many people I think think of this program as a seasonal program and there are certainly times of the year where there is more activity than not.

16:04
But applications are available to individuals all year round and will be accepted all year round.

16:11
In July, we hope to launch our online application which is provided to us through a partnership with USDA and in mid-july we will be making our first issuance to children, children's households of the automatically eligible population.

16:34
The 31st of August again is the last day on which we will accept applications for the 2025 program year.

16:42
That means if households wish to receive a benefit in 2025, they need to apply by August 31st, September 1st.

16:53
Following from that is the first day in which we will accept applications for the 2026 program year.

16:59
So if someone applies on September 1st, that will be considered to be an application for a benefit in the summer of 2026.

17:10
September 15th is our target deadline for all our 2025 program year application processing and November 13th is our approximate time frame for the unspent 2025 benefits to expunge.

17:31
The Sun Box program has a specific 122 day expungement time frame and November 13th works out to be 122 days from that expected first issuance.

17:44
But those expungements will continue on a rolling basis just based on whenever the funds in the account hit the 122 day federal deadline.

17:57
November 29th will be the last day for the 2025 program.

18:02
Your Sunbox appeals to be submitted.

18:05
Next slide please.

18:10
Here's a summary of the key changes for this year that that we've been able to make.

18:17
The first one that that we've discussed is that we're going to be doing earlier issuances and processing of applications.

18:25
We think that that will be a benefit to households who are receiving this.

18:30
And as was said earlier, we hope that we can continue to move the issuance and application processing deadline back to earlier in the summer.

18:45
We will have an online application available to households.

18:48
We hope that that is useful improvement.

18:52
The 3% verification process is something that was waived for Pennsylvania in the 2024 program year, but it's something that we must do in 2025.

19:06
This is something that's not a necessarily change for the program, but it wasn't something that anyone had to deal with previously because of how late the benefits were issued last year.

19:17
You should know that applications that we receive before July 1 of 2025 must use the federal poverty income guidelines from July 1, 2024 through June 30th, 2025.

19:29
And then applications received on or after July 125 must use updated F pigs.

19:38
We've also made a number of enhancements on our system processing side, which we hope will do a better job and ensuring that the Sun Box issuances are targeted to the appropriate household address.

19:55
We understand that there were challenges and getting the benefits to the appropriate household and household address in the previous year and improvements that we have made we think will reduce the likelihood of those same obstacles occurring this year.

20:12
Next slide, please.

20:16
It's important that we talk about some of the remaining points of friction in the Sun Bucks program.

20:22
As you can see, eligibility for the program is rather complicated and I think that that can drive individuals to feel the need to apply for children despite the fact that they might actually receive this benefit automatically.

20:40
That's always going to be something that we want to communicate to the families about and we appreciate any help that you can be in communicating to families about the fact that your child, their children might be automatically eligible and an application may not be necessary for receiving the benefit.

21:02
It remains the case that we don't have a statewide a database of student enrollment.

21:09
So that can make matching challenges difficult for the program.

21:15
That hasn't changed from the previous year and we continue to do our best to ensure that eligibility conferred by school data goes to the right place.

21:28
Community Eligibility provision schools are challenged as well because these are schools in which many of the children have have demonstrated a need enough that the school itself has determined that every kid would receive meals from the school.

21:48
But that has kind of a countervailing effect for the Sun Box program where they have not necessarily submitted an application for free and reduced price meals.

21:59
And that might mean that some children who would have otherwise received Sun Box automatically may need to apply if they're not receiving SNAP Tana for one of the direct certification conferring eligibility categories for Medicaid.

22:17
The application deadlines, I think are always a challenge because it's something that I think people don't normally need to keep up with.

22:26
And that makes sense given that it's not actually a seasonal program.

22:31
But in your conversations with people about this program, we encourage you to tell them if they feel that they do in fact need to apply, they should do so to receive a benefit by in this year by August 31st, the fixed appeal deadline, it's kind of a similar challenge.

22:48
This is something that's not set by us.

22:50
We don't have a choice in the matter.

22:52
And so if that appeal deadline is not adhered to, then an opportunity may be missed.

22:59
Individuals can self attest on applications for many of the things that they need to share, but that could pose some challenges in our application processing too.

23:14
And finally, there is the fixed benefit expungement deadline of 122 days, which is different than the SNAP program which introduces a new complexity for households to be aware of.

23:29
Next slide.

23:33
Now we want to run through some frequently asked questions to try and make sure that you get a good sense of how the program will work if this is new to you or do a refresher if it's not.

23:47
If a household circumstances changed during the year, does that impact their eligibility?

23:55
We want to make sure that you know that if the household was found eligible at any point in the year, the student will remain eligible for that program year.

24:03
If that household needs to report a change of address, they can do that on Compass or our mobile app or calling the Customer Service Center.

24:14
Will all children in a household get the benefit on the same card?

24:19
If possible, only one Sun Bucks account will be created, but if children qualify for Sun Bucks in different ways, they may be separate.

24:28
We will do our absolute best to make sure that all children receive their benefit on the same card.

24:34
But again, because the card benefit is driven by where the child's eligibility has been conferred, that could result in multiple benefit issuances for kids that are nominally in the same household.

24:54
Next slide, please.

25:00
What should a household do if they believe they would receive an automated benefit, but they did not receive one?

25:06
This is an important question because that deadline of August 31st kind of hinges on it.

25:12
Benefits will be distributed beginning around mid-july and all issuances should be completed by October of 2025.

25:20
Generally, we would say that if a household thought that they were automatically eligible and that the child would receive the benefit, they should contact us about that and we can take a look at the case to see what's taking place.

25:33
What should a household do if they received benefits for one child but not for another child?

25:39
It's important to know that siblings can get the benefits at different times.

25:43
Some children younger than six or older than 18 May not be eligible even if a child is in the same household that is eligible.

25:53
Next slide.

26:01
What should a household do if they were denied but believe they are in fact eligible?

26:06
We think that in this circumstance, the household should appeal the eligibility determination.

26:12
When someone appeals an eligibility determination, there's an opportunity to provide anything that was omitted and their eligibility can be outcome can change.

26:23
It's also the case that they could reapply to What should a household do if they lose the Sun Box card?

26:30
This will be particularly relevant, I believe, because a number of households will receive their Sun Box benefits for this year on their previous year's cards and to get a replacement they can contact PADHS on the phone numbers we have available.

26:48
What should a household do if they receive a benefit but do not wish to receive a benefit?

26:54
Sometimes this happens if that benefit was received on the EBT card.

26:58
The parent or guardian can contact Pennsylvania DHS and we will make sure that it is expunged.

27:04
If it's coming on a sun box card then they can cut up the card and and not use it.

27:09
Next slide, please.

27:16
Generally, we want to make sure that you know that assistance is available for handling Sunbox eligibility questions.

27:22
You should contact PADHS at the phone numbers listed and contrasted to that, schools are not in a position to be able to assist households with Sunbox eligibility and programming questions, and we do not want you to direct people to contact their school or PDE.

27:41
If you have an issue associated with Sunbox, please contact the Department of Human Services.

27:47
Next slide, please.

27:51
We have some information available to you on our Sunbox web page.

27:55
We've taken a lot of time to try and update this for the coming program year.

27:59
The eligibility navigator.

28:00
There's more FA QS beyond what I've discussed here.

28:04
It's very comprehensive, generally how to apply a new application for 2025.

28:12
There are promotional materials if you want to get information about this out to the people that you work with.

28:18
It's just a a lot of good resources.

28:21
And of course, as soon as the online application link becomes available, it will be made available there too.

28:28
Next slide please.

28:32
OK.

28:33
Well we're going to go over to questions and we will start with the first one that came in from Brittany client.

28:45
Apologies.

28:46
Brittany, by what date will automatically eligible households receive a letter in the mail notifying them and confirming their eligibility for this program year.

28:58
So we don't have a strict deadline on which the letters going out that says you will receive a Son Bucks benefit will be complete.

29:09
We did begin issuing those letters at the beginning of the month.

29:14
There are several 100,000 of those letters that go out and so the if the person is unsure of their eligibility and Sunbucks benefits have been issued were passed that mid-july date would encourage them to contact PADHS.

29:37
The next question we have available is from Jenna Hollinger.

29:41
Will families be able to sign the application through the online application?

29:46
I believe the answer to this is yes.

29:48
Brian, are you on the line and can you also speak to that?

30:09
We don't hear you, Brian.

30:18
Well, we'll include that information on our web page, OK.

30:24
Are there other questions that people have about the Sunbox program?

30:47
OK.

30:49
Will the online application be through Compass from Brittany?

30:53
The online application will not be available on Compass.

30:56
It will be on a stand alone web page.

30:58
It is through a service provided to us by USDAFNS.

31:06
Good question, Vanessa Morrell asks.

31:12
Is there a way for individuals to see if they are signed up there At this time is no mechanism for a child's household to determine if the child is automatically going to receive the sun box benefit.

31:29
We are sending letters to those households which state that the child will receive a Sun Box benefit which will convey that information.

31:39
We also have the eligibility navigator which can be followed to determine if the child will receive the benefit as well.

31:47
But there is no, I guess you could say like an online portal or anything like that, that would say this person is going to receive a Sun Box benefit in this year.

31:59
So the letter is really for that purpose.

32:05
OK.

32:06
GAIL asked about the 3% verification process and the purpose of this verification process.

32:12
This is a program integrity measure that is a part of the Sun Box program that was put into the final rule put out by USDA when the program was developed and that is why we are doing it.

32:33
Vanessa asks if households can receive can use their Son Bucks card from the previous year.

32:39
Yes they can.

32:40
The cards do not deactivate.

32:42
In fact, for some people, the benefit may be reissued onto that card and for that reason, our advice has been for households to hang on to that card, but they can always request a replacement by contacting PADHS.

33:00
And Brian does have a response for us.

33:02
Thank you, Brian.

33:04
When completing the online application, there is a signature portion for the applicant to complete.

33:09
If the question is about whether someone who submitted a paper application can go in and complete a signature online, the answer is no.

33:16
So to recap, yes, the online application has an online signature mechanism, but if a paper application was submitted, there is no similar mechanism.

33:45
Are there additional questions you'd like to have addressed?

33:59
OK.

34:00
Well, not seeing additional questions.

34:02
What I can say is that this presentation is being recorded.

34:07
We can make it available once we've concluded here.

34:11
And of course, the broader set of resources that we have on the on the screen will continue to be updated throughout the Sun Box summer operational period to try and get people good actionable information about the Sun Box program.

34:31
Thank you for your time this afternoon and we hope that you have a good day.