

MDE Update | December 2024

As we end 2024 and head into 2025, we're into our second year of Minnesota Free School Meals, and our data from the first year is being compiled, compared and evaluated. You all have served students in Minnesota over 150 million meals! My hope for you all is that the second year is improving, getting smoother and more comfortable as you settle into the new normal of increased participation rates.

Over this past year, I've had the privilege of getting to see you as you've invited us out for school site visits and your annual conferences. I want to thank you for doing so and acknowledge the frustrations you've expressed, as well as the compliments of what is going well with your relationships with MDE and the Nutrition Program Services division. Taking that into mind, the Nutrition Program Services division of MDE has been getting ready for our current year of Administrative Reviews, training, and looking ahead to the goals.

In October, the management team of our division met for our annual goal-setting, as well as a look back at what we were able to accomplish in the prior year. Below is a quick overview of those areas that pertain most to school nutrition:

Overview of prior year goals:

1. Hire additional staff to support sponsors
2. Clean and organize website and guidance
3. Internal clean and organizing of procedures, workplan, and process

I'm proud to say we have begun major work in all these areas. By October 2024, we had onboarded two additional application and claims staff, as well as numerous program and financial staff that work directly with sponsor reviews. We are still trying to hire a customer support specialist and another supervisor.

Overview of current year goals:

1. Communication, customer support and relationship-building
2. Evaluation and data management
3. Improved training
4. Improve technology systems

Our goals for this current year build upon last year's success, and we'll continue to work on our website and guidance as that work is absolutely not done. One goal area you'll see soon on the website is the updated and completely re-worked procurement guidance. Our aim was to consolidate our resources so sponsors could go to one area and have one main guidance document. On top of continuing to build upon last year, we are aiming to greatly improve our communication and customer service, which we feel are key to relationship-



Presenting at the MSNA SNIP Conference
in October at Grand View Lodge

building. This also means we're putting a greater emphasis on getting in the car and driving out to see you when there are issues you want to show us in these programs.

On the topic of technology, we're still on track to release improved CLiCS screens by December 31, 2025 across all programs. This is not going to be the end of the project, though. Once we get the updated screens, we'll turn our focus to making improvements to the flow of the applications and claims-processing that may be needed.

As far as evaluating and training, I feel these goals speak for themselves, but please let myself or any of the management team know if you have ideas on what would make this better, and we'll take that into our work this year. We have noted the preference for Tuesday at 2pm webinars, and although we do not plan to bring that back in the same capacity, we are looking at additional webinar options with that format – stay tuned!

Lastly, to end my updates, I again want to thank all of you for the work you do and the patience you've had with us these past few years of constant change.

Emily Honer
Director, Nutrition Program Services
Minnesota Department of Education (MDE)