

Food Research and Action Center



Strategies in Tough Economic Times *Increasing Access to Summer Meals*

Introduction

This summer, more families than ever will be struggling with hunger due to the terrible recession. During the school year, many of these families rely on school breakfast and lunch to provide their children with healthy meals and stretch their limited financial resources. It is likely that when this school year ends there will be a dramatic increase in the number of children in desperate need of nutritious meals.

The Summer Nutrition Programs (the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program) are designed to replace school breakfast and lunch during summer break, but, even during times of economic stability, participation in summer meals is too low. Only one in five of the low-income children who rely on school lunch during the school year receive meals through the Summer Nutrition Programs. Even prior to the recession, so few children had access to summer meals that USDA research finds that food insecurity rates increase for households with children in the summer, and the increase is greater for states with low Summer Nutrition participation rates.¹ Similarly, many food banks report that the demand for emergency food spikes in the summer months as families struggle to provide for their children.

In order for children to receive meals during the summer, the Summer Nutrition Programs must be available at sites throughout low-income communities, and families must be informed about the available programs. The layoffs and reduction in work hours that have become commonplace during the recession have made many more communities eligible to offer the Summer Nutrition Programs. As a result, state agencies, schools, anti-hunger and child advocates, nonprofits and other stakeholders must implement proactive strategies to recruit sponsors to operate the Summer Nutrition Programs or to expand the

availability of the programs within communities that already are being served by a sponsor.

They also must conduct aggressive outreach campaigns to inform families about the program. Many of the children who will need access to nutritious meals this summer have never participated in the Summer Nutrition Programs, and their parents may not know the programs are available, or how they can participate.

State agencies, schools, anti-hunger and child advocates, and other stakeholders have an important role to play in increasing participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs. Key strategies are outlined below:

1. Identify underserved communities and increase the number of sites.
2. Expand existing Summer Nutrition Programs.
3. Conduct aggressive outreach campaigns to inform families and children of the program sites.

About the Summer Nutrition Programs

The two federally-funded Summer Nutrition Programs—the Summer Food Service Program and National School Lunch Program under its Seamless Summer Option—provide funding to serve children age 18 and younger nutritious meals and snacks during the summer months at sites located in low-income areas (where at least half of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals) or that serve primarily low-income children (at least half of the children enrolled in the program are eligible for free or reduced-price meals). Open sites are located in low-income areas and provide meals any child who comes to the site. Sites serving primarily migrant children and summer camps also can participate.

Public and private nonprofit schools, local government agencies, National Youth Sports Programs, and private nonprofit organizations can sponsor (administer) the SFSP and operate one or multiple sites. Only schools can administer the Seamless Summer Option, because it is an option within the National School Lunch Program. For more information about the Summer Nutrition Programs, visit <http://www.frac.org/afterschool/summer.html>

¹Nord, Mark and Kathleen Rooming. 2006. "Hunger in the Summer: Seasonal Food Insecurity and the National School Lunch and Summer Food Service Programs," *Journal of Children and Poverty* 12(2): 1 41-158.

Identify Underserved Communities and Increase Access

Sites qualify for the Summer Food Service Program and the Seamless Summer Option if 50 percent or more of the children in the area or enrolled in the program are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. More communities are becoming eligible for the Summer Nutrition Programs as more children are being qualified for free or reduced-price school meals. States should be vigilant about identifying communities that are newly eligible for the program and work with schools, government agencies, and private nonprofit organizations to ensure that the communities are served.

Now is also the time to recruit sponsors and increase participation in communities that were already eligible for the program, but not participating. Many low-income communities are being hit the hardest by the recession as parents who were already struggling to make ends meet lose their jobs or have their hours cut. State child nutrition agencies, public officials, local leaders, and advocates can work together to implement strategies that will increase participation in eligible but underserved communities.

- The first step is to identify the communities that are newly eligible or that are underserved by the Summer Nutrition Programs. State agencies can identify these communities and work with public officials and advocates to recruit new sponsors and to identify sites. For more information on strategies and resources to attract sponsors to the Summer Nutrition Programs, visit www.frac.org/afterschool/summer_toolkit.htm.
- States should extend their deadline for sponsors to submit Summer Food applications and offer training up until the end of the school year to provide additional time to recruit sponsors. The federal deadline for applications is June 15, and states can apply for a waiver to allow even later applications, but many states set a much earlier deadline

Simplified Summer Food

The Summer Food Service Program is now easier to operate. Congress recently simplified the program rules, which reduces administrative work and ensures that all sponsors receive the maximum federal reimbursement for each meal. This makes it easier to feed children during the summer months and creates an exciting new important opportunity to recruit schools, local government agencies, and nonprofits to operate the Summer Food Service Program.

and conduct training as early as February or March, and not again thereafter. Extending the deadline allows state agencies the opportunity to respond to new challenges facing the community. For example, if a large employer in a community lays off employees, the state agency should ensure that the children in the community have access to summer meals by aggressively recruiting a sponsor to administer a summer food site.

- State agencies and advocates also should reach out to sponsors who dropped out of the program in recent years and encourage them to operate again one of the Summer Nutrition Programs this year. The increased need in the community combined with the simplification of the Summer Food Service Program can help draw these sponsors back into the program.
- State child nutrition agencies should work with the divisions in the Department of Education that are administering the new federal education funding provided through the economic stimulus law to ensure that any new investments in summer programming are linked to the Summer Nutrition Programs. The economic recovery law did not provide funding specifically for summer programs, but many of the increases in education funding can be used to fund summer programs. For more information, visit www.afterschoolalliance.org/policyEconRecovery.cfm.

Expand Existing Summer Nutrition Programs

Sponsors can improve their programs and better meet the needs of the families being hurt by the recession by serving more meals to more children throughout the entire summer. State child nutrition agencies, public officials, advocates, and other stakeholders should provide encouragement and technical assistance so sponsors take the following steps.

- Sponsors should serve additional sites this year. Many smaller organizations do not have the capacity to operate the Summer Nutrition Programs. They also are reeling from budget cuts and staff reductions due to state and local funding cuts due to the recession. Serving additional sites throughout the community will ensure that children have access to meals.
- State agencies can make serving additional sites more attractive to experienced sponsors by waiving the first week site visit requirement for their sites that operated successfully in the past. Many sponsors that serve a large number of sites find it difficult and costly to visit all of their sites during the first week of operations. The United States Department of Agriculture's policy memorandum that allows this visit to be waived for successful, experienced sites is available online: [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer/Administratio n/Policy/2000-2002/2002-3-1\(2\).pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer/Administratio n/Policy/2000-2002/2002-3-1(2).pdf).
- Sponsors should operate the program throughout the entire course of the summer—from the day after the school year ends to the day before the new school year begins. Participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs tends to drop off during the summer, in large part due to sponsors ceasing operation before the end of the summer. This year, more families will need this resource for the entire summer.
- Sponsors should provide meals on the weekends. Currently, few sites operate on weekends, but children need access to nutritious meals on weekends too. Many summer food sites, such as public housing complexes, parks and recreation centers, and places of worship, would be able to serve meals to children on the weekend. As the recession makes it increasingly harder for families, it is critical that children have access to meals every day during the summer.
- Sponsors should be encouraged to provide the maximum number of meals available—breakfast and lunch at most sites—instead of just one meal or one meal and a snack. Sites serving primarily migrant children and camps, however, can serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Sponsors also can serve breakfast later, instead of at 7 or 8 in the morning, so that more children participate. Increasing the number of meals available will ease the financial pressure on struggling families.
- Sponsors may be able to increase the number of sites they serve by drawing on volunteers. In many of the communities that have been hurt by the recession, more parents will be available and interested in supporting a summer food site.
- Sponsors also may be able to benefit from the youth jobs created through the \$1.2 billion in economic recovery funding for youth training and employment opportunities. To learn more, visit www.summerlearning.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=246&Itemid=358.
- Schools running summer school should be encouraged to provide meals to all of the children in the community by operating the Summer Food Service Program or the Seamless Summer Option, instead of the traditional school lunch program, which only provides funding to feed students enrolled in summer school. Schools running the Summer Food Service Program or the Seamless Summer Option need to conduct outreach to encourage all of the children in the community to participate.

Conduct aggressive outreach campaigns to inform families and children of the program sites

Many sites do not serve as many children as they could. Often, families simply do not know that the program is available. This is especially true for families which have been hit by the recession and have never needed summer meals before. To let families know that the program is available, states and communities must launch aggressive outreach campaigns.

- They can develop materials announcing the program that can be distributed throughout the community. Flyers can be handed out, and posters can be hung at places of worship, food pantries, community and cultural centers, low-income housing complexes, WIC clinics, SNAP/Medicaid/TANF offices, and job training programs, as well as restaurants and stores that have community bulletin boards. Posters also can be hung on buses, trains, or in public transit stations. Model materials are available at www.frac.org/afterschool/outreach.htm and www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer/library/outreach.html.
- State agencies and communities can ensure that families can find out where the summer food sites are located. Some communities set up a summer food hotline that families can call to locate the nearest summer food site (all flyers include the number). Some communities already have a 211 hotline that links families to emergency resources, which also can provide referrals to summer food sites. The hotline has a list of open summer meal sites and links the caller to the closest

site. State agencies also can put the list of sites along with meal service times on their websites. And in smaller communities or in materials geared for specific neighborhoods, the list of sites can be included directly on the outreach materials.

- Schools can help inform their students. They can send materials about summer food programs home with students as the school year comes to a close; promote the program at parents' nights and meetings; encourage teachers to talk about the program in class; make announcements over the PA about it; and post flyers about it throughout the school. At the end of the school year, they can send a list of local sites and other promotional information home with students.
- State agencies and communities can promote the program through the media (newspapers, television, and radio) by sending out press releases and doing interviews. They also can develop and ask local stations to run Public Service Announcements. Hosting a summer food kick-off event provides the opportunity to promote the program and to get press coverage. These events are usually held at summer food sites, and many anti-hunger advocates turn it into a fun event for the children. They also invite local celebrities and elected officials to increase the energy of the event.

Conclusion

The Summer Nutrition Programs have a vital role to play in countering the negative impact of the recession on families. The programs reduce the families' food costs and ensure that children have access to nutritious meals, but they can help only if children are able to participate. State agencies, schools, anti-hunger and child advocates, and

other stakeholders should work together in the months leading up to summer to ensure access to the Summer Nutrition Programs. Additional resources on increasing access and participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs are available on FRAC's Summer Outreach Toolkit www.frac.org/afterschool/summer_toolkit.htm.