

The Summer Food Service Program plays a critical role for low-income children when school is out. It ensures that they have access to healthy meals during the summer months and attracts children to educational and enrichment programs that help prepare them to return to school in the fall. The following are some strategies for operating a cost-effective summer food program.

Program Planning and Logistics

- Serve breakfast and lunch at all sites. This increases the amount of meals you serve and creates a larger economy of scale.
- Adjust serving times to maximize the number of children attending the site. For example, children are more likely to eat breakfast later in the morning during the summer months. Consider serving breakfast at 9:30 a.m. instead of 7:00 a.m. USDA recently waived previous requirements for the time between and the duration of meal service, giving sponsors more flexibility.
- Contact the state agency contract manager immediately with menu changes. In some cases, unapproved menu changes cause meals to be disallowed.
- Work with the state agency to make accurate meal pattern predictions to avoid a significant number of extra meals. Many new sponsors overestimate the number of children that initially come to the site.
- Work with the vendor to allow changes in the number of meals delivered so that the site does not receive more meals than they need.
- Use volunteers to help with the meal service, which will reduce labor costs.
- Target programs that already have staff to serve the meals and take the meal counts when adding new sites.

Daily Operations

- Plan menus with healthy child-friendly food to limit plate waste.
- Create menus that use leftover food the following day and plan Friday meals that will keep until Monday. (It is important to follow all food safety requirements to ensure that all meals served are safe to eat.)
- Use offer versus serve when logistics allow for the storage of unused food and for children to choose items (as opposed to serving a unitized meal). USDA recently gave all sponsors the option of doing offer versus serve, which can decrease plate waste and meal costs.
- Ensure that staff at all sites understands the importance of accurate meal counts so that all paperwork is filled out properly.
- Access lower-cost food and less expensive paper products such as utensils, cups, and napkins, through your community's food bank.

Participation Rates

- High participation rates throughout the summer ensure that your program is cost effective, which makes outreach crucial.
- Work with schools and community partners to promote summer meal sites.
- Use banners, posters, backpack mail, direct mailings, neighborhood canvassing and other outreach methods to inform children and parents about the summer food program.
- Ask local companies and foundations to help fund outreach for summer meals.
- For more outreach strategies to increase participation, visit http://frac.org/newsite/wpcontent/uploads/2010/04/outreach_tips.pdf.