

The Basics of the Summer Nutrition Programs

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program's (NSLP) Seamless Summer Option are federal child nutrition programs that provide funding for meals and snacks served to children 18 and younger, during the summer or extended breaks at year-round schools. Most summer meal sites provide educational, enrichment, or recreational activities that keep children learning, active, and safe when school is not in session. These programs contribute to children's healthy growth and development by providing them with nutritious meals and snacks over the summer months, a time when children can be more at risk for hunger and weight gain.

Schools, local government agencies,¹ and private nonprofit organizations² can sponsor SFSP. Sponsors have an agreement with the state child nutrition agency and are fiscally responsible for operating the program. The sponsor is reimbursed for the meals served to children. A sponsor can offer meals to children at numerous sites throughout the community. Sites can include swimming pools, schools, summer programs, community centers, parks, churches, mosques, synagogues, low-income housing complexes, and other locations where children congregate during the summer.

A **site** qualifies either as an open or an enrolled site. An **open site** is located in a low-income area where 50 percent or more of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. The site is then open to all the children in the community (open restricted sites are open sites that limit or restrict participation for safety or security reasons). An **enrolled site** only provides meals to children enrolled in the program. An enrolled site qualifies if it is located in a low-income area or if at least half of the children enrolled in the program are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

¹Local government agencies could include the city parks and recreation department and the county health department.

²Private nonprofit organizations could include food banks, YMCAs, and religious organizations.

Begin Work to Increase Participation

Efforts to increase participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs should focus on three areas:

- **enlisting new sponsors, or increasing the capacity of existing sponsors;**
- **increasing the number of sites; and**
- **ensuring that families with children know about the program.**

Without sponsors in the community operating accessible sites, children cannot participate in the program. In addition, children and parents must know the program is available and the site's location in order to participate. Before developing an outreach plan, evaluate summer food in your community to determine the extent to which you focus on increasing sponsors, sites, or children. Use the following questions to find the basic facts about summer meals in your community or state:

- Who is sponsoring SFSP, NSLP, or both?
- Are sponsors willing to take on additional sites?
- Are there enough sites to serve the community? Are there sites that are underutilized?
- How many children participate in the Summer Nutrition Programs?
- How do the summer nutrition numbers compare to the number of children participating in free and reduced-price school meals during the school year?

The state child nutrition agency can help you answer these questions. The answers determine whether the program is underutilized — due to a lack of sponsors, sites, children, or a combination thereof — and will direct your work to expand the program. Many state agencies are working hard to promote the Summer Nutrition Programs and can be valuable partners. Many have developed outreach materials, such as flyers, brochures, and posters, which you can use instead of developing your own. When possible, using similar cross-marketing materials can help build awareness of the Summer Nutrition Programs.

Below are steps to increase participation by sponsors, sites, and children as well as a typical state/community timeline. Since states have different deadlines, check with your state child nutrition agency and adjust the timing of your efforts to increase participation in summer nutrition programs accordingly. To accomplish some of the outreach steps, one must plan much earlier than when the outreach activity needs to occur. At the end of the summer, meet with the state agency and sponsors to discuss how the outreach efforts went as well as make plans for next year. For more information on debriefing the Summer Nutrition Programs and setting goals for next year, use FRAC's Summer Meals Calendar.

Actions for January and February: Enlist New Sponsors

- Contact the state child nutrition agency about their timeline and plan to expand participation in SFSP so your efforts are complementary. Many states want to be included in all or some of your outreach efforts.
- Determine whether the state agency will convene a summer meal planning meeting with stakeholders.
- Identify eligible areas that need additional sponsors. The state agency has information on schools serving low-income areas and on the sites that sponsors serve. Locate areas that have poverty, but are not served by a sponsor or are served by a small sponsor with limited capacity to operate additional sites.
- Meet with the school district, city and county governments, or large private nonprofits to recruit potential sponsors. Connect with key local government agencies, such as the parks and recreation department; the city department of human, health or community services; libraries; and the mayor's office. Some large nonprofits to meet with might include United Way, local food banks, YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, local community centers, religious institutions, and any others that serve children in the community. At the meeting, express the need and benefits of the Summer Nutrition Programs. Before the meeting, develop a fact sheet that includes the number of children in the community who receive free and reduced-price school meals, the number of those who receive summer meals, and the funding that the Summer Nutrition Programs could bring to the community.
- Promote the Summer Nutrition Programs to potential sponsors through existing networks and associations, such as the state school nutrition association, the state association of principals, the recreation and park

association, the state school-age care association, the state afterschool network, and the child care resource and referral agency. Many of these groups have newsletters, websites, and email list-serves where you can post information about summer meals.

- Attend the state's sponsor training where sponsors learn about the paperwork, other requirements, and receive technical assistance to operate the program. The training is an opportunity to learn more about the program requirements and to meet the sponsors. Establish a good relationship with the sponsors, because they will be critical to increasing the number of sites and children served.
- Afterschool Meal Program sponsors make great summer nutrition sponsors because many operate programs for children year-round. Talk with the state agency about strategies to recruit Afterschool Meal Program sponsors for Summer Nutrition Programs.

Actions for March and April: Increase Sites

- To increase the number of sites, a sponsor must agree to take on additional sites. Meet with sponsors to discuss their capacity and ability to serve more sites as well as what interested sites must do to sign up with the sponsor. The sponsor may have a form for sites to fill out and return or they may want the site to call them directly.
- If the sponsor is unable to take on new sites, work with them to determine barriers and identify solutions. For example, increased marketing can help with underutilized sites, and strengthening relationships with vendors can improve the appeal of the meals to keep children coming to the site and help reduce food waste.
- Once a sponsor takes on additional sites, recruiting those sites is relatively easy compared to recruiting a sponsor. The site is usually required to attend a site training that outlines their responsibilities to store and serve meals as well as record the number of meals served.
- Identify low-income areas where children congregate during the summer, such as summer programs, community centers, swimming pools, parks, low-income housing complexes, and churches. Connect these sites to a sponsor through the process you have outlined with the sponsor. Many communities have existing networks or associations of service providers, which are good partners in promoting summer food. They can inform providers in the community about the opportunity to become a summer food site. Service providers often know where the children in their community spend their summer time. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Capacity Builder Map can help identify gaps in summer meals access.

- Promote the opportunity to be a site by tapping into the same communications channels of child and youth-servicing organizations that helped recruit sponsors.
- Work through local grant-makers, such as the Community Foundation and United Way, to identify potential summer food sites. Many local funders provide grants to children and youth-servicing programs. They have databases of these programs and can organize meetings with their grantees to promote Summer Nutrition Programs.
- Provide technical support to sites to overcome barriers. For example, a swimming pool may be a great location, but it requires staff to hand out the meals, ensure the children eat at the site, and take the meal count. Link this site to the local youth employment program.
- Use social media to increase summer meals awareness. Host Twitter Chats or Town Halls to engage partners and local leaders in promoting the meal program and reaching more families. Share pictures and meal service times on Facebook.
- Ask schools to send information about Summer Nutrition Programs with a list of local sites home with children at the end of the school year. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (the most recent Child Nutrition Reauthorization act) requires schools to help with outreach for the Summer Nutrition Programs.
- Ask the utility company to include information about the Summer Nutrition Programs in monthly bills as well as local grocers to print information on the backs of receipts.
- Work with school PTAs to share information on the Summer Nutrition Programs with parents and teachers during meetings.

Actions for May and June: Increase Child Participation

- Develop eye-catching flyers, brochures, and posters, or use materials developed by USDA Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS) or the state child nutrition agency, to distribute and display throughout the community. Hand out flyers and hang posters at churches, community and cultural centers, low-income housing complexes, WIC clinics, SNAP/Medicaid/TANF offices, job training programs, and restaurants and stores that have community bulletin boards.
- Include information about USDA's National Hunger Hotline on outreach materials. Families can call for information on the nearest summer food site location by dialing 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish) from Monday through Friday during the summer. Some communities may already have a 211 hotline that links families to emergency resources, which may be able to provide referrals to summer food sites. The 211 line can provide information to families who need help, but are not calling specifically about summer food. Like the National Hunger Hotline, 211 has a list of open sites and connects the caller to the closest site.
- Use web-based summer site locators that can search for the closest site. Some states have websites where you can search for the nearest summer site by entering a zip code. USDA also hosts a national Summer Site Finder map at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/summerfoodrocks>.
- Host canvassing events and distribute door-hangers throughout low-income neighborhoods. Volunteers from local faith-based organizations and colleges/universities can help distribute the door-hangers.
- Ask the local food bank and their member agencies to hang posters about meal sites on the walls and to include flyers in food bags. Pantry volunteers can inform the people they serve about the program.
- Contact newspapers, local radio, television, and cable stations to promote the program through a Public Service Announcement, interviews, or op-ed pieces.
- Work with local movie theaters to show a slide at the start of movies that promotes the Summer Nutrition Programs.
- Hold a summer food kick-off event to promote the program and generate media coverage. Host the event at summer food sites to create photo and story opportunities for the press. Many anti-hunger advocates create a fun event for children and families, with activities and giveaways. Inviting local celebrities and elected officials can help increase the energy and visibility of the event.