

Summer Food Service Program in Kansas



Replicable strategies to increase summer meals participation

Introduction

Kansas communities have come together to serve thousands more meals year after year to kids through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). More than 1.4 million meals were served in the summer of 2018. Every school day, nearly 180,000 Kansas children eat a free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program, with many also receiving a free or reduced-price school breakfast. But during the three months of summer break, these programs are not available to provide the consistent nutrition students get at school.

SFSP is a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) program created to fill the gap between the end of one school year and the start of another in qualifying low-income areas. It is flexible in that free meals can be served in many places where kids go during the summer, such as schools, libraries, swimming pools, churches, camps, and apartment complexes. The organizations running the programs (commonly called the sponsor) are reimbursed for the meals they serve.

The goal of this paper is to highlight best practices to expand SFSP and demonstrate replicable strategies for advocates in other states. Kansas is a particularly rural state. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment classifies 34 out of 105 counties as “rural” as 6.0–19.9 persons per square mile (ppsm) and another 36

counties as “frontier” with > 6.0 ppsm. The strategies, successes, and challenges shared throughout this paper exhibit ways to expand access to summer nutrition in small towns and across rural America.

SFSP Program Overview

- SFSP is federally funded by the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service, the same office that administers the National School Lunch Program.
- Children and teens ages 1–18, and persons with mental or physical disabilities over age 18 who participate in school nutrition programs can participate in SFSP.
- Sponsors are tax-exempt organizations that provide year-round service to the area where they intend to provide SFSP, such as schools, government agencies, or nonprofit organizations.

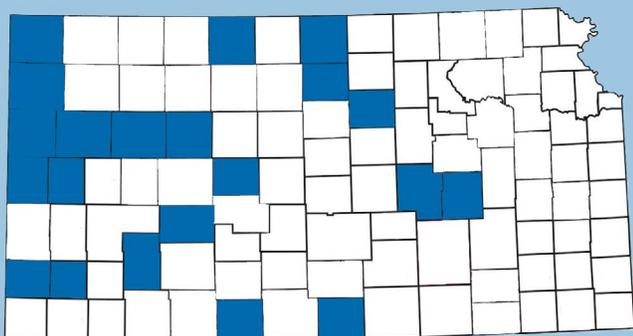
Current Landscape of Participation

Kansas’s participation in SFSP has increased substantially at all levels since 2011 (see table); the number of sponsors, sites, and the number of meals served have all gone up each year. Since 2011, Kansas has seen a 100 percent increase in sponsors, a 156 percent increase in meal sites, and a 68 percent increase in participation.

Year	SFSP Sponsors		SFSP Sites		Total Meals Served	
2018	182		711		1,420,492	
2017	172	↑100%	664	↑156%	1,404,634	↑68%
2016	160		577		1,340,118	
2015	138		484		1,305,111	
2014	122		387		1,161,310	
2013	105		365		1,057,190	
2012	96		328		963,957	
2011	91		278		846,119	

The increase in the number of sponsors, sites, and meals served in large part has been the result of efforts by the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) and advocates to establish new sites in areas with no or few existing sites. These advocates include Kansas Appleseed, food banks serving Kansas, nonprofit organizations, schools, and individuals across the state. Since summer 2014, the number of counties with no operating sites has been cut in half, falling from 44 in summer 2014 to 21 in summer 2018 (see map).¹ The number of counties without operating SFSP sites has fluctuated in recent years after declining significantly. This reflects persistent challenges to cover low-density, low-population counties with the program. Sites in more counties are expected to begin operating in summer 2019.

Kansas Counties Without a Summer Food Service Program Site in 2018



Kansas continues to improve its national SFSP ranking relative to the 49 other states in the nation and the District of Columbia. According to the Food Research & Action Center's (FRAC) June 2018 report, "[*Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report*](#)," Kansas has risen from 45th to 40th from school years 2015–2016 to 2016–2017, respectively. FRAC measures states' SFSP performance as a ratio comparing a state's average daily participation (ADP) in summer meals and regular school year National School Lunch Program ADP. In the same school years, Kansas' ratio increased from 9.2:100 to 9.6:100. This means Kansas is among the 12 states that provided summer lunch to less than one child for every 10 children who participated in school lunch.

¹ Note: These figures only account for sites that participate in SFSP; counties without SFSP sites may have summer nutrition programs that are not affiliated with SFSP. For example, Sherman County provided summer nutrition through the Seamless Summer Option through the National School Lunch Program.

Summer Expansion Strategies

Lunch Across Kansas Month

In Kansas, the average daily SFSP participation is much lower in July than in June, but the need for the program remains constant. In recent years, the total number of meals served in June has been almost double the total number of meals served in July. This is due to a variety of challenges related to a lack of capacity among sponsors and sites. For example, most school nutrition staff are not contracted to work during the summer. In smaller communities, the program relies heavily on volunteers, and there may not be large enough pools of volunteers to staff sites throughout summer.

To address the need to extend access into July, Kansas Appleseed sponsors an annual campaign called Lunch Across Kansas Month. The month-long campaign encourages program sponsors to host events and activities to raise awareness and increase summer meals participation in July. For example, in Topeka, Kansas Appleseed worked with a site at the public library, a local comic book store, and additional partners to host "Lunch & Learn" to provide free comic books and other enrichment activities to summer meal participants. In Kansas City, staff collaborated with local sponsors and the "Dotte Meals Rock" mobile program to host a summer barbecue and splash pool party.

The enrichment activities that sites offer can help prevent the summer educational and nutritional slide, so kids are ready to learn when they return to school. Program sponsors that committed to serving summer meals in July were targeted with additional outreach and marketing support. As often as possible, local media outlets are invited to attend stops on the tour to help increase awareness of the program. This support included ways to maintain and drive participation: 1) social media posts about the program notifying families of extended service days; 2) email blasts to partners and community members; 3) flyers and information displayed in highly visible areas, like on marquees or signs; and 4) special events featuring activities or special programming.

Kansas Appleseed works with dozens of program sponsors in diverse communities across the state to promote these special events and market them. Examples include participatory cooking demonstrations for kids,

film screenings of popular kids' movies, Vacation Bible School programming, farm tours, collaborations with public pools and water parks, and many more. By the end of July, hundreds of children have participated in these events that reinvigorate site volunteers and help maintain participation. Kansas Appleseed also has used the tour to create a Lunch Across Kansas mural by asking kids to draw their favorite summer foods and activities. The mural featured children's art from across the state and became an advocacy tool to share with relevant policymakers to convey SFSP's importance.

Lunch Across Kansas Month also highlights innovations at the site level that can be replicated by others. By including sites in large and small communities, program sponsors can discover insightful tips on programming, site locations, collaborations, and more.

Regional Summits and Community Meetings

Kansas Appleseed hosted regional SFSP Summits from 2015 to 2017 and continues hosting similar summits with SFSP workshops alongside other child nutrition programs. Summits are regionally located throughout the state and rotate every year to make the meetings as accessible as possible despite the geographical size of Kansas. Outreach for the summits targets communities with low levels of participation and high potential for additional sites, new collaborations, and expanded program service days. The timing of the summits being in the fall season allows sponsors to plan for the expansion of their program and to incorporate new strategies and tactics.

Established sponsors and community members interested in becoming partners are invited to attend the summits. Attendees participate in workshops to learn and share best practices and outreach tactics. Importantly, Kansas Appleseed conducts thorough follow-up with summit attendees by holding dozens of community meetings each year with local stakeholders across the state to expand and sustain sponsors and sites. At these meetings, Kansas Appleseed works to bring new partners to the table; encourages the adoption of best practices to promote sustainability of the program; and helps communities develop individualized outreach plans to maximize meal participation. Bringing key partners, like city governments, public health departments, or research and extension



offices, is critical to the sustainability of programs. These partners add value to local SFSP collaborations by acting as conveners, and are more likely to have staff time or other resources to dedicate to collaborations.

In communities with particularly low capacity (e.g., due to lack of will or awareness in addition to the usual capacity challenges), Kansas Appleseed devotes considerable time and resources to the development of outreach and marketing plans. This includes extensive assistance to sponsors, sites, and local partners. Examples of this support include helping sponsors develop an online presence with social media and website development, mapping a site's location, and distributing outreach materials (such as signage), hosting kickoff events to generate visibility and excitement, and developing marketing materials (such as flyers, advertisements, and press releases). New sponsors and sites are grateful for this investment and remain engaged with Kansas Appleseed. The support increases enthusiasm among local partners and volunteers, and strengthens the program for future expansion. It also creates strong relationships between local SFSP partners and Kansas Appleseed.

Partners know they also can reach out to Kansas Appleseed for technical assistance regarding program requirements. One local partner in Junction City shared that Kansas Appleseed's support enabled their local SFSP collaboration to move beyond the basics of the program and focus on innovative ways to improve participation

and access, like incorporating higher quality, local foods. Kansas Appleseed hosted the regional summits in close partnership with the KSDE and the support of the Kansas Health Foundation. KSDE staff provided in-depth technical assistance to sponsors regarding reimbursements, meal component requirements, and eligibility. In addition to the regional summits, the department invites Kansas Appleseed to their workshops and other informational events throughout the year. These events allow sponsors to communicate challenges and successes with one another. The above supports to sponsors lower the chance of non-compliance with SFSP requirements and make sponsors more familiar, and comfortable, with the program.

This intensive, personal outreach is sustained through a monthly newsletter notifying sponsors, sites, and community members of grant opportunities. The newsletter serves to keep lines of communications open in regards to technical assistance and the implementation of outreach plans. Kansas Appleseed has grown a network of SFSP advocates and stakeholders to nearly 1,200 strong.

Supporting Innovative Partnerships

In different communities across Kansas, challenges and obstacles to successful SFSP programs vary. The aforementioned regional summits and Lunch Across Kansas tour are both strategies to support innovative partnerships to overcome these barriers to participation. Due to Kansas Appleseed's statewide efforts to expand summer meals, the organization serves as a hub for new ideas and lessons learned.



Inadequate transportation is frequently a severe problem for summer meal sites in communities big and small. In Hutchinson (population 40,772), children are brought to the public library site with a “walking bus.” Volunteers, such as parents or daycare providers, coordinate to pick up kids on their walks to the library, much like how a bus picks up kids along its route. In Augusta (population 9,389), the local United Methodist Church leveraged available funding to use their church bus to transport children to the local summer meal site. In Iola (population 5,450), the local site used a refurbished bus to serve multiple sites throughout the town and outlying townships within the county. As with any other summer meal site, these drop-off sites should be in places where children already congregate, like pools, parks, and libraries.

Another challenge to summer meal participation is stigma associated with anti-hunger programs. Kansas Appleseed encourages sponsors to overcome stigma by 1) always communicating that the program is open to all children; 2) engaging the community through presentations that explain how summer meal programs can reduce nutritional and educational summer slides; and 3) using creative names for programs to disassociate them from government programming. In Strong City (population 455), the summer meal program markets itself as “That Pop-up Restaurant” where kids can get free “Chipotle-style” burritos, for example. Another successful strategy to reduce stigma is for communities to find funds to allow parents to participate in summer meal sites. In some Kansas communities, family meals remain an important part of their cultures, and children may refuse to eat without their parents being served a meal or snack.

Surveying Sponsors

After summer 2018, Kansas Appleseed began a new initiative to survey program sponsors. This effort expands SFSP surveying capacity in Kansas, in which the Kansas State Department of Education and Kansas Appleseed can collaboratively utilize the results. In fall 2018, Kansas Appleseed surveyed 103 sponsors by phone. Respondents provided answers regarding outreach tactics, challenges faced, and plans for the next summer. Seventy-two percent of respondents were positive about summer meal participation during summer 2018 while 22 percent mentioned being disappointed in how the program often suffered from low participation. The other six percent of the sponsors surveyed provided a response that was neither positive nor negative, or responded “unsure.” When prompted to share outreach tactics undertaken to drive participation at local sites, the average sponsor shared that they implemented more than four best practices. The most popular best practice mentioned was sharing program information on a website. When asked what additional supports would benefit their programs, the most common responses were ideas for outreach, additional funding, and more staffing and volunteers. Only four sponsors were unsure if they would continue SFSP in summer 2019.

With this new survey, Kansas Appleseed will be able to further refine its ability to measure the success of its efforts to disseminate and implement best practices, and to target sponsors and areas of the state with low participation.



Conclusion

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) continues to expand in Kansas, increasing access to nutritious meals for children across the state. This success is due to strong collaboration with local, state, and national partners. At the national level, the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) provides Kansas Appleseed with invaluable tools and strategies to implement at state and community levels. FRAC facilitates critical conversations with peer organizations from other states to share ideas and best advocacy practices.

In recent years, including summer 2018, Kansas Appleseed has seen meal participation increase, but at slower and slower rates from summer to summer in terms of meals served. Kansas Appleseed is cognizant of the trend and is taking steps to support the continued robust expansion of SFSP in the state. The aforementioned statewide survey of program sponsors is one strategy that is currently underway. Initial analysis suggests Kansas faces increasing relative costs to expanding SFSP accessibility in smaller communities due to diminishing gains in total meals served. On the other hand, large numbers of children could be accessing summer meals at existing sites, and strengthening these programs may have relatively lower costs. There also are considerations to be given to the racial disparities in Kansas and the allocation of resources to expand programs in smaller communities with largely white populations, as opposed to focusing on underperforming meal programs in larger towns and cities with higher populations of Kansans of color.

Kansas Appleseed remains committed to a truly statewide effort to ensure every child has access to healthy, nutritious meals over the summer. The continued success of the summer meal program in Kansas requires continuous innovation in response to new and unexpected challenges. Kansas Appleseed is in a strong position to push the expansion of SFSP, due to a deep connection with communities across the state, and a vibrant network of existing program sponsors, sites, and advocates.

Acknowledgment

Kansas Appleseed’s work to increase access to nutritious meals over the summer, as well as this paper, are made possible by support from the From Now On Fund, the Food Research & Action Center, and the Kansas Health Foundation.