

A particularly important, yet challenging, component of building strong Summer Nutrition Programs is sponsor retention. State agencies may choose to focus their outreach efforts on sponsor recruitment, but keeping experienced sponsors operating the program is imperative to maintain strong, sustainable Summer Nutrition Programs year after year. The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) encourages state agencies to establish sponsor retention plans that support the goals that follow.

- **Sponsors as customers:** Allow sponsors to feel ownership over the application and implementation procedures established by the state agency. Send surveys or host events with community partners and sponsors immediately following the summer months to evaluate and assess the previous summer.
- **Tracking sponsors:** Establish methods for communicating with sponsors throughout the year. Survey and connect with sponsors from the previous summer to determine who will be returning and the need for new sponsor recruitment.
- **Community partnerships:** Develop outreach and messaging strategies, in partnership with sponsors and community and statewide groups, to help identify opportunities for sustaining previous levels of operations and for growing and expanding the programs.
- **Targeted technical assistance:** Work directly with sponsors who have struggled financially and administratively in previous summers. Assign specific state agency staff members to each of these sponsors to help address any issues or barriers to participation previously faced to ensure a successful operation of the Summer Nutrition Programs in the future.

The Summer Nutrition Programs, which include the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program's (NSLP) Seamless Summer Option, offer free meals and snacks to children at eligible summer meal sites — places where children congregate during the summer, such as parks, swimming pools, schools, summer programs, community centers, and religious institutions. The programs only operate during summer vacation or during year-round schools' extended breaks. The meals and snacks

are vital to the continued growth and well-being of the children who normally have access to school meals during the regular school year.

For summer meals to be available in a community, a sponsor must agree to take on the administrative and financial responsibilities of operating one of the Summer Nutrition Programs. Local government agencies and private nonprofit organizations can sponsor SFSP, while schools have the additional option of operating NSLP during the summer. The sponsor can provide meals at one or multiple eligible sites in the community. Sites qualify if 50 percent or more of the children in the area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, according to school or census data. In addition, sites that serve primarily low-income or migrant children and some summer camps are eligible to participate.

In many communities, one or a few sponsors provide meals to sites and an eligible site will need to find a local sponsor once it has agreed to join the program. Too many communities do not have a sponsor willing to take on the responsibility of operating the Summer Nutrition Programs or they have sponsors that are unwilling to serve additional sites, resulting in the program(s) serving only a small fraction of the children who could benefit.

The following are recommendations and strategies used by state agencies and advocacy organizations to work together to retain existing sponsors and ensure there are enough sponsors and sites serving eligible state and local communities year after year.

Sponsors as Customers

State agencies can view the sponsoring organizations they work with as their customers and allow them to feel ownership over the application and implementation procedures they use. State agencies can convene all of their sponsors and groups that support them to help assess the operations of the previous summer and set goals for the upcoming summer. Additionally, state agencies can

recognize specific sponsors for providing excellent programming and meals to the children attending their sites.

Community Partner Meetings

State agencies can host community partner forums in a handful of cities and invite local sponsors and partner organizations that assisted in outreach. The purpose of these meetings is to evaluate the previous summer and to begin planning for next summer. These meetings also provide a venue for the state agency to strengthen its relationship with sponsors and an opportunity for sponsors and advocates to network, identify which practices were most effective, and brainstorm ideas for continued improvement. These meetings are often held in September or October because the memory and experience of operating the Summer Nutrition Programs is fresher. Finally, some state agencies allow new groups who may be interested in sponsoring to attend these meetings to learn from, and collaborate with, current sponsors and advocates about how they might best contribute to the work already being done in their communities.

Sponsor Meetings

Following community partner meetings, state agencies can host a meeting specifically with their sponsors to discuss successes and challenges faced by sponsors and share ideas for improving both the application and implementation processes. State agencies should annually update all of their forms used by sponsors and sites based on feedback provided by the sponsors. These meetings specifically allow sponsors to feel ownership over the programs and their processes and create sponsors' buy-in to ensure the success and sustainability of the programs year after year.

Best Practice Awards

When providing feedback, sponsors have suggested that state agencies create nonmonetary best practice awards to generate a healthy competition among the sponsors to strive for excellence. For example, Florida's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has given out the following awards: "Greatest Increase in Number of Meals Served," "Farm to Summer," "Outstanding Outreach," "Healthiest Meals," and "Above and Beyond." State agencies can give out these awards every fall as a certificate and the sponsors have reported great pride in bringing the

certificates back to their organizations and posting them in their offices. These awards also create an opportunity to reach out to the media to increase the reach and visibility of the Summer Nutrition Programs.

Tracking Sponsors

State agencies can use several methods for tracking their sponsors, both returning and new, as a way to build and maintain their relationships with their sponsors and provide an opportunity for the state agency to intervene, should any sponsor express hesitation or concerns about returning to the program.

Exit Polls and Surveys

State agencies can conduct an exit poll or survey at the end of the summer to give sponsors the opportunity to provide feedback to the state agency on its application and implementation processes as well as successes and challenges of the past summer. This method is particularly helpful for state agencies unable to convene their sponsors and community partners in person for immediate feedback following the summer months. Also, by following up with sponsors at this time, state agencies can continue communicating and maintaining momentum with their sponsors throughout the year as preparations begin for the next summer.

Training Strategies

State agencies can use their trainings strategically as an opportunity to support sponsor retention. They can encourage registration for training by early December to help track returning sponsors and to design their trainings to make the Summer Nutrition Programs more accessible to sponsors, such as offering separate training dates for both returning and new sponsors and offering the trainings in a variety of cities throughout the state. They can then closely track the registration list for their sponsor trainings so that immediate contact can be made to previous sponsors who have not yet registered. If a previous sponsor does not register for training, the state agency can immediately connect with that sponsor to see if any barriers or previous challenges faced can be addressed. If the barriers or challenges cannot be addressed, the state agency can connect with other sponsors from that area to determine

whether they will be able to pick up additional sites. If not, or if the sponsors cannot absorb all of the sites, the state agency can target that community for new sponsor recruitment.

Intent to Participate Forms

Some state agencies, such as Michigan's Department of Education, request that sponsors submit "intent to participate" forms by January. State agencies can then immediately contact any sponsor that does not submit a form to address any concerns or challenges faced in previous summers. Early identification of a sponsor who is not returning gives the state agency time to identify other groups that may be interested in taking on that sponsor's sites in the upcoming summer.

Sponsor Surveys

At the conclusion of each summer, state agencies can survey previous sponsors of the programs to assess their intent to return. The survey should include questions regarding the sponsor's interest in returning and maintaining their previous number of sites, or if they will have the capacity to serve additional sites, staffing changes, and whether there will be changes to the sponsor's contract with their vendor. The results of this survey enable state agencies to gather information regarding whose application they should expect. They also may need to target their outreach for new sponsor recruitment or help expand a current sponsor's operation to cover any sites that were covered by a sponsor that will not be returning. State agencies should immediately connect with sponsors who do not fill out the survey to determine whether that sponsor will be returning and to provide additional support to resolve challenges cited by the sponsor for why it will not continue operating the program.

Sample Sponsor Survey

The following questions were developed by FRAC, in partnership with the California Department of Education and the California Summer Meals Coalition, and were used to survey sponsors of the Summer Nutrition Programs.

1. Which Summer Nutrition Program (NSLP or SFSP) did you operate last summer?
2. Do you plan to sponsor again next summer?
 - If not, why are you not planning on sponsoring again?
 - If so, will you take on additional sites?
3. How many additional sites will you add?
4. Would you like help identifying additional sites?
5. Where are your current and/or future sites located?
6. What challenges did you experience as a sponsor last summer?
7. From your experience, where could you use additional support to increase the number of children who attend the Summer Nutrition Programs?
8. Would you like to receive additional information and resources?

Community Partnerships

State agencies can find out which partner organizations in the community and throughout the state are assisting their sponsors in their operations of the Summer Nutrition Programs and establish their own relationship with these organizations. These groups can be vital to the successful operation of the programs on a local level and can also greatly assist those that have a limited capacity to conduct outreach for the programs.

Sponsor and Site Recruitment

Often, the connections made at community partner forums, or similar events, can provide state agencies insight into which new organizations they may be able to bring into the programs. Several state agencies, including the District of Columbia's Office of State Superintendent of Education and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, also rely on community partnerships to target their outreach in specific communities to fill in the gaps left by a sponsor that will not return to the program. State agencies can rely on state or local anti-hunger groups, such as D.C. Hunger Solutions and Project Bread, to conduct targeted outreach to recruit new sponsors and sites as well as raise awareness about the availability of the program in

eligible areas. Local community partners also can assist new sponsors and sites who are coming into the program to establish their operations and fulfill their responsibilities to the state agency. State agencies should make themselves available to any groups or organizations interested in the programs that their community partners have found or to be an additional support to them as they complete their application and establish how they will be operating their sites during the summer.

Targeted Outreach and Messaging

State agencies can develop a media and communications plan to remain in touch with sponsors and potential vendors, such as a monthly or bimonthly newsletter, as preparations begin for the next summer. State agencies should coordinate their messaging throughout the state, particularly around best practices, such as encouraging all sponsors whenever possible to operate their sites as open sites, to operate throughout the entire summer, and for schools to sponsor community-based sites.

Targeted Technical Assistance

State agencies can make themselves as accessible and available to their sponsors as possible to encourage continued participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs. Sponsors, whether experienced or new, often have questions and concerns about applying to, or implementing, the programs during the summer months and while preparing for the start of their programs during the year. These questions and concerns, no matter how minor, can be addressed directly by state agency staff members to ensure a comprehensive understanding of program rules and regulations by all participating sponsors.

Delegation of Staff Time

For sponsors that have faced administrative or financial concerns in their operations of the Summer Nutrition Programs in previous summers, state agencies can establish a support program for those sponsors and assign a specific state agency staff member to them. This staff member can be the one who conducts their pre-operative review to ensure appropriate program setup, be available to work directly with them throughout the summer months, and assist in monitoring the areas specifically identified as issues in previous years to ensure a successful operation of the programs moving forward.