

Food banks play a critical role in expanding the reach of the federally funded child nutrition programs to meet the growing need, including during COVID-19 and beyond. With vast networks and programmatic expertise, food banks are natural leaders in promoting and providing summer and afterschool meals and working with program providers and partners to serve meals at sites across the country.

Two programs — the Afterschool Meal Program through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) — provide funding to food banks to serve suppers and snacks to children. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides the funding for these programs through a state agency in each state, usually the state department of education, health, or agriculture. Offering meals and snacks through CACFP and SFSP not only affirms food banks as key allies in eliminating childhood hunger, but it also provides an opportunity to draw down federal reimbursement to support operations and partner with community organizations.

Things to Know

- Food insecurity has increased due to COVID-19. It is [estimated](#) that 6.8 million additional children across the country will experience food insecurity as a result of COVID-19, bringing the total number of food-insecure children to [18 million](#) (1 in 4 children).
- As a result of the unique challenges posed to child nutrition programs during COVID-19, USDA has issued many flexibilities for SFSP and the Afterschool Nutrition Programs, including waivers for area eligibility so that free meals can be offered in communities across the country; for congregate feeding so that meals and multiple days' worth of meals can be picked up to be eaten at home; and allowing parents to pick up meals at a site without their child present. An overview of these waivers can be found [here](#).

- Feeding America's network of 200 food banks across the U.S. provides free meals to low-income children who are at risk of hunger both after school and during the summer months when school isn't in session. Throughout the pandemic, over 100 food banks in the Feeding America network have been offering summer meals through SFSP and the Afterschool Nutrition Programs.

Food Banks in Action During COVID-19

Feeding San Diego (California)

Feeding San Diego serves 26 million meals a year to people facing hunger and has operated the Summer Nutrition Program for the past seven years. Feeding San Diego expands access to summer meals by sponsoring a variety of community institutions and organizations. Meal sites include community centers, YMCAs, apartment complexes, libraries, and Boys & Girls Clubs. In areas highly concentrated with multiple immigrant and refugee communities, they also place sites that serve each individual community, even if they are in close proximity to each other in order to meet the needs of each community. To reach military families, they work with the Armed Services YMCA to serve breakfast and lunch every day.

Lowcountry Food Bank (South Carolina)

Lowcountry Food Bank receives and distributes food throughout their community to over 300 partner agencies, food pantries, and community centers. Lowcountry

Food Bank sponsors SFSP and works with schools and community partners to coordinate efforts. Schools are great partners for expanding summer meals participation, and it is important to make sure efforts are not duplicated. School sites are great locations to distribute meals because of their central locations and the open lines of communication that they have with families. Lowcountry Food Bank also uses mapping tools to identify areas of highest need for additional sites and to recruit volunteers.

Feeding the Gulf Coast (Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi)

Feeding the Gulf Coast serves 24 counties spanning the Florida panhandle, southern Alabama, and southern Mississippi. Each summer, Feeding the Gulf Coast operates SFSP. Through key community partnerships and support from school systems, they were able to provide meals at over 150 “grab and go” sites when schools closed in the spring.

Best Practices: Food Banks and Summer Meals

- **Determine the need.** Food banks can play an important role in supporting existing efforts and filling the need in underserved areas. USDA’s Capacity Builder Map can help identify gaps in summer meals access. The [state child nutrition agency](#) and state [anti-hunger organization](#) also can help with determining where new sites should be added.
- **Be creative.** Lowcountry Food Bank markets their summer meal sites as pop-up picnics and operates them along a mobile meal route. Additionally, many food banks have the capacity and infrastructure to implement

mobile meal programs, which can be an important strategy for expanding a program’s reach in rural and other hard-to-reach communities.

- **Collaborate with community partners.** Food banks can collaborate with a variety of community organizations and partners in order to ensure access to summer and afterschool meals. For example, food banks may be able to provide meals at libraries, schools, parks, and other locations where children gather during the summer.
- **Combine summer and afterschool meals with other food bank services to maximize participation.** Feeding the Gulf Coast leverages SFSP and the Afterschool Nutrition Programs by distributing foods provided by The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and scheduling mobile pantries at meal sites.
- **Serve meals year-round.** Serving meals year-round through SFSP and the Afterschool Meal Program can help support overall operations by drawing down additional reimbursement. It also helps food banks maintain relationships with community sites and staff.

Getting Started

Interested in serving summer and afterschool meals? Food banks should contact their [state child nutrition agency](#) to learn more and get started.

Resources

- [FRAC’s Summer Nutrition Program](#) page
- Food Banks and Summer Meals [webinar recording](#)
- [Feeding America Action](#) page