



Meals Matter: Operating Strong Summer Meals Programs

Summer meal programs play a critical role in reducing hunger when school is out, but participation remains far below the level of need. Strong summer meal programs require intentional planning, accessible sites, strong operations, effective outreach, and ongoing improvement.

This resource recaps best practices shared during FRAC's [Operating Strong Summer Meals Programs](#) webinar, highlighting strategies from Monroe Family YMCA, Hunger Intervention Program, and the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department.

Things to Consider

- **Use data and community input to guide planning.** Sponsors should identify eligible areas, review participation trends, look for gaps in service, and listen to families and community partners when deciding where and how to operate sites.
- **Choose accessible, welcoming sites.** Strong sites are located where children already gather, such as schools, parks, libraries, housing communities, recreation centers, and youth-serving organizations. Sites should be safe, familiar, easy to find, and clearly marked.
- **Match the meal service model to community needs and sponsor capacity.** Sponsors may use congregate, rural non-congregate, hybrid, mobile, self-prep, or vended models depending on what works best for their community and operations.
- **Plan staffing and training early.** Staff and volunteers are the face of the program. Clear procedures, early hiring, engaging training, and site-level support can strengthen both compliance and the participant experience.
- **Start outreach before summer begins.** Families need repeated, simple messages about when and where summer meals are available. Outreach should use multiple channels, trusted messengers, translated materials when needed, and clear signage at sites.
- **Use data and feedback to improve throughout the summer.** Sponsors should review participation by site and day, gather feedback from staff and families, adjust meal counts or outreach as needed, and hold an end-of-summer debrief to inform future planning.

Making It Work: Programs in Action

The **Monroe Family YMCA** operates a mix of congregate, rural non-congregate, and hybrid summer meal sites across Michigan. Their model shows how sponsors can expand access by meeting families where they are and building strong community partnerships.

- Use data and community input to identify high-need areas and avoid duplicating services.
- Serve meals where children already gather and where transportation barriers are reduced.
- Use flexible models, including congregate, rural non-congregate, and hybrid service.
- Partner with local institutions, such as community colleges, to support self-prep meal operations.
- Start conservatively with meal counts and adjust as participation patterns become clearer.
- Hire and train staff early to avoid mid-summer staffing challenges.
- Incorporate youth and family voice into menu planning.

The **Hunger Intervention Program** serves communities in Northeast Seattle and the surrounding areas. The organization shifted toward a more community-centered model by hiring community site coordinators who live at or near the meal sites they serve. This approach strengthens trust, outreach, and local ownership.

- Partner with housing authorities, low-income housing communities, and shelters to bring meals closer to where families live.
- Hire community members to serve meals in their own neighborhoods.
- Use community-led outreach, including neighbors and trusted local messengers.
- Offer stipends or honorariums when asking community members to support outreach or feedback collection.
- Ask partners to take an active role in the program to build stronger buy-in.
- Focus on building stronger, better-supported sites rather than simply increasing the number of sites.

The **Columbus Recreation and Parks Department** in Ohio operates a large urban summer meals program through partnerships with schools, recreation centers, youth-serving organizations, churches, apartment communities, and other community partners.

- Use meal gap mapping and other data tools to identify underserved neighborhoods.

- Serve meals where young people already are, including recreation centers, schools, churches, and apartment communities.
- Use mobile options such as a food truck, to reach children who may not be able to access a traditional site.
- Create clear standard operating procedures, schedules, staff training, and site expectations before summer begins.
- Build and maintain relationships with vendors, sites, and community partners year-round.
- Connect summer meals to broader community goals, such as equity, healthy communities, safety, and safe places for young people to gather.

Additional Resources

- [FRAC's Summer Nutrition Programs resources](#)
- [U.S. Department of Agriculture summer meals Capacity Builder](#)
- [U.S. Department of Agriculture SFSP Site Supervisor's Guide](#)
- [Summer Food Service Program Contacts](#)