



## Rural Non-Congregate Summer Meals: How Sponsors Are Implementing This Option

Established as a permanent program option in 2023, the Rural Non-Congregate option expands the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program's Seamless Summer Option (SSO) by offering a new meal service approach for sponsors in rural areas. Rural populations often face specific barriers to accessing congregate summer meal sites, including limited transportation and lack of nearby meal sites. The Rural Non-Congregate option was established to help address these barriers.

To operate the Rural Non-Congregate option, sites must be in an area that is designated as rural by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), meet the SFSP and SSO criteria for site eligibility, and serve children in areas that are not reached by congregate sites.<sup>1</sup> Meals served through this option do not have to be consumed onsite. State agencies can approve or deny a sponsor's application to operate under this option based on their assessment of a sponsor's capability to provide rural non-congregate meals.

### Rural Non-Congregate Meal Service Flexibilities

The Rural Non-Congregate option allows for greater flexibility when it comes to both what types of meals are distributed, as well as how those meals are distributed. Sponsors and sites can use their knowledge of their eligible population to decide what methods would maximize their reach.

#### *Meal Service Methods*

- **Individual meals:** A site can choose to distribute meals individually and operate each day.
- **Multiday meals:** A site may distribute up to 10 calendar days' worth of meals. For example, a site could provide 10 breakfasts and 10 lunches every two weeks.
- **Bulk meals:** Sites can choose to distribute food in bulk, such as loaves of bread and gallons of milk, and can generally give up to five days' worth of bulk food at a time.

#### *Distribution Methods*

- **Parent/guardian pickup:** Meals can be issued to a parent or guardian without the presence of the eligible child if the sponsor or site can track the pickup to

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<sup>1</sup> State agencies must define what qualifies as a 'nearby' congregate site. This could be based on a specific distance (such as a set radius), or it could be defined more broadly to mean that children in the area do not have access to any congregate meal site

prevent duplicate issuances. The pickup can be through walk-up or drive-through distribution.

**Spotlight:** [Hickory City Schools, Drive-Through Non-Congregate Meals](#)

In 2025, this district in North Carolina served over 90,000 meals through its drive-through model. The school’s nutrition director stated that this model allowed them to “streamline operations, reach more families efficiently, and ensure that no child went without a meal.”

- **Mobile delivery:** Sponsors are permitted to travel to multiple locations and distribute meals at pre-determined sites. In this case, each stop on the mobile route is considered a site.

**Spotlight:** [Missoula Food Bank, Meals on the Bus](#)

Operating since the pandemic, Missoula Food Bank in Montana distributes summer meals from a bus at multiple sites throughout the day during the summer months. In 2025, the bus distributed over 7,800 meals to children to keep them fed throughout the summer.

- **Home delivery:** Meals can be delivered directly to the home address of eligible children after sites obtain written consent from the eligible child’s parent or guardian. Each approved delivery route is counted as a site, as opposed to each child’s house. Children are eligible if they reside within an eligible area or if a child is income-qualified for free or reduced-price school meals.

**Spotlight:** [Food Bank of Alaska, Meals To You](#)

The Food Bank of Alaska works with select schools across the state to ship meals via the United States Postal Service to eligible families in rural areas. Families within those districts must fill out an application to be enrolled. The boxes contain five days’ worth of shelf stable food, and families receive a box per week.

## Implementation Practices

As the permanent Rural Non-Congregate option continues to expand, sponsors are implementing systems for effective communication, meal distribution, and oversight, to ensure families can reliably access meals and that program rules are followed. Below are examples of practices emerging in states and communities as they work to successfully operate this option.

### *Communications*

- **Keep families informed on the operations of sites** — This can be done through a website or through social media and should convey the timeframe for distribution and the location of sites, how many meals the child will receive, the menu, any required documentation for pickup, and contact information.
- **Ensure families are aware of program rules** — Many families may not be familiar with this program option. Making it clear who is eligible to get meals, what documentation must be provided to prove parent/guardianship or eligibility, whether a child must be present to pick up meals, and that families can only receive meals from one site per day can help avoid confusion before they arrive at the site.

### *Distribution Logistics*

- **Have families pre-register prior to meal pickup** — To ensure sites are prepared, sponsors can ask families to pre-register either online or by phone. Sites should also have an option to register onsite if they are choosing this method, and meals must be served on a first-come first-served basis despite registration.
- **Create a system where once a parent is verified, they can be quickly identified at future visits for sites where parent and/or guardians can pickup** — During a parent's or guardian's first visit, they will be required to provide proof (a letter from the school, a report card, a student ID, etc.) they are picking up for an eligible child. Sites can then use an identifier such as a QR code to identify them and streamline their pickups on future dates.
- **Align distribution of meals for nearby sites** — Having all sites in an area distribute meals around the same time on the same day can reduce confusion for families who may have trouble coordinating which sites are operating when.

### *Meal Service Options*

- **Consider families transportation logistics** — If many families are walking or using public transportation to reach the site, providing fewer than 10 days' worth of food may allow families to more easily transport that food home. However, providing only a single day's worth may mean they have to travel more often than they are able. Consider what may work best for the community.

- **Choose pickup times that are accessible for working families** — Meal service times must be approved by the state agency; however, sponsors can have extended hours that meet the needs of families that work during the day, allowing them to access meals.

#### *Partnerships*

- **Identify and engage key partners** — Other community organizations may be able to provide equipment, volunteers, or locations that can allow for easier distribution. These organizations may also be able to engage populations that are harder to reach such as families that do not speak English as their primary language or are hesitant to participate in government programs. Some examples may be health care providers; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinics; libraries; churches; and higher education institutions.
- **Work with anti-hunger organizations or other organizations that can aid in cross-promotion of nutrition programs** — Children who are eligible for summer meals may also be eligible for additional nutrition programs such as Summer EBT and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Having partners to engage with families and connect them to the needed resources can be key in keeping children fed in the summer and beyond.