

The Summer Food Service Program plays a critical role for low-income children when school is out by ensuring they have access to healthy meals during the summer months. The program also attracts children to educational and enrichment programs that help prepare them to return to school in the fall. The following are suggested strategies for operating a cost-effective and sustainable summer food program.

Program Planning and Logistics

- Serve breakfast and lunch at all sites. This increases the number of meals served; therefore, drawing down a higher reimbursement and creating a larger economy of scale.
- Adjust meal-serving times to maximize the number of children attending the site. For example, children are more likely to eat breakfast later in the morning during the summer months, such as 9:30 a.m. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service has waived previous requirements for the time between, and the duration of, meal service, giving sponsors more flexibility to determine the time that breakfast is served.
- Contact the state agency contract manager immediately with menu changes. In some cases, unapproved menu changes can cause meals to be disallowed.
- Work with the state agency to make accurate meal pattern predictions to avoid a significant number of extra meals. Many new sponsors overestimate the number of children that initially come to the site, thus increasing plate waste. In the event your site underestimates the number of children who attend, keep extra shelf-stable meals onsite to account for unexpected attendance.
- Work with the food vendor to allow daily changes in the number of meals delivered so that sites do not receive more meals than they need.
- Target programs that already have staff available to serve meals, or use volunteers to help with the meal service to help reduce labor costs.

Daily Program Operations

- Plan menus with high-quality, appealing food to limit plate waste. Provide feedback to vendors on meals if changes need to occur.
- Create menus that use leftover food the following day and plan Friday meals that will keep until Monday. (It is important to follow all state and local food safety requirements to ensure that all meals served are safe to eat.)
- Use Offer Versus Serve (OVS) when logistics allow for the storage of unused food, and for children to choose items instead of serving a unitized meal. All sponsors have the option of doing OVS, which can decrease plate waste and meal costs by allowing children to choose the food they like.
- Ensure that all site staff are properly trained and understand the importance of accurate meal counts so that all paperwork is filled out properly.
- Access lower-cost food and meal-service products, such as utensils, cups, and napkins, through a community food bank.

Participation Rates

- High participation rates throughout the summer ensure that a summer nutrition program is cost-effective, thus making outreach and marketing crucial.
- Work with schools, anti-hunger organizations, and community partners to promote summer meal sites before classes end, and hold a kick-off event at the beginning of summer to get the word out.
- Use banners, posters, backpack mail, direct mailings, neighborhood canvassing, robo-calls, and other outreach methods to inform children and parents about the Summer Food Service Program.
- Ask local companies and foundations to help fund outreach for summer meals and provide funds for parent meals to draw more families to programs.
- For more outreach strategies that increase participation, refer to [FRAC's outreach tips](#).