

2019

Hunger Innovation Report



**SHARE OUR
STRENGTH**

Foreword

Share Our Strength is a national organization working to end childhood hunger in the United States and abroad. Through proven, effective campaigns, Share Our Strength connects people who care to ideas that work. Share Our Strength's largest campaign is No Kid Hungry, which works to ensure that children from low-income families get the healthy food they need.

This report was made possible with generous support from the Sodexo Stop Hunger Foundation. We are grateful to the organizations that participated in this project, helped to promote it to partners and colleagues, and shared their stories through interviews and case studies. The lessons and learnings shared remind us that when it comes to hunger, there is not one single solution. Rather, our collective ideas and efforts, be they radical or incremental, are our best bet at ensuring that all kids have access to the food they need. For more information about this project, contact Share Our Strength at innovation@strength.org.

Introduction

Innovation is a core value at Share Our Strength and it's a commitment we take seriously. With two teams fully dedicated to following an innovation process, we're invested in understanding user experience and discovering new models. Our teams are focusing on activities such as developing new strategies to reduce food insecurity in hard-to-reach, rural communities, improving the WIC experience, and identifying the newest fundraising platforms.

Today, one out of every seven kids lives in a home impacted by hunger. Despite a myriad of federal nutrition programs and an army of dedicated organizations and individuals working to minimize its impact, hunger persists. Innovative efforts to tackle childhood hunger—including Summer EBT pilots and breakfast in the classroom programs—have been successful at connecting kids with food. But we need to continue to identify new strategies and approaches to ensure that every kid has the food they need to thrive.

That is why we launched a national survey aimed at understanding how stakeholders are testing and implementing new strategies for addressing child hunger. Almost 200 food banks, school districts, local governments, and private companies responded. The survey explored their attitudes and capacity for innovation and uncovered numerous innovative strategies and programs designed to feed kids. This report summarizes what we learned.

You can view a full list of the submissions we received by visiting [insert a hot link](#).



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What We Learned

The organizations we heard from agree: innovation is sorely needed in our fight against hunger. Looking ahead, most people believe that innovation will play an even bigger role as we ramp up our efforts.



87%

of survey respondents indicated that **more innovation is needed to end childhood hunger.**

This was especially true when asked about the programs we know, love, and support, like school breakfast and afterschool meals. When it came to where innovation is most needed, there was no clear answer. Rather, responses show that there is opportunity for innovation across all program areas. Of those who responded, 19 percent saw the greatest opportunity for innovation in summer meals; 17 percent in fresh produce; 12 percent in school breakfast; 9 percent in school lunch; 9 percent in SNAP; and 5 percent in other programs or strategies.

Most respondents think their organization is innovative (90 percent), but wish they could innovate more. When asked about what gets in their way, the similarities were striking: one out of three organizations surveyed called out limited capacity (31 percent) and a quarter identified funding constraints (26 percent) as their top barrier to innovation.

When it comes to outcomes, survey responses revealed the success and failure of a new project often hinges on the stakeholders involved, more than the resources available. While organizations differed on which set of individuals was most important, when asked about what is vital for the success of a new project, 65 percent of respondents selected a response that expressed that the people involved matter.

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Specifically, survey respondents noted that supportive leadership, strong project managers, input and involvement of beneficiaries and community members, and partner fit were critical to the success of a new project.

- Leadership is invested (16 percent)
- The project manager closely manages the program (14 percent)
- It is designed with the beneficiaries' needs in mind (14 percent)
- Community members are invested (13 percent)
- It builds on existing organizational strengths (12 percent)
- We found a strong partner to help drive the work forward (8 percent)
- Its location (7 percent)
- The research that went into the project (7 percent)
- There is a strong funding base (4 percent)
- Its use of technology (3 percent)
- Other (2 percent)

It's clear most organizations take an innovative approach to tackling hunger every day. While there is agreement in our industry that this work is important, the programmatic focus each organization takes is divergent. Some see opportunity in nutrition education, while others have doubled down on increasing access to free summer meals.

The takeaway? To ensure that kids have access to the food they need, we all have a role to play. While each role is different, there is a good chance that learnings from one organization or focus area can inform another.

The Breakthrough Ideas

The survey surfaced almost 200 new ideas, programs, and promising practices. As we read each response, we were struck by similarities. While there was variety in the specific ideas or programs respondents described, broader themes about the approaches people are taking to innovating within the field emerged. Some ideas showed up only a few times, while others, like engaging the end user, showed up frequently. This report details the top six:



1

Engage end users in design

When an end-user is engaged in the design process, a program is more likely to be successful because it is developed to meet the real needs of participants.

2

Find and feed kids where they are

If the goal is to feed more kids, don't make them come to you, go to where they already are or create spaces and places where they want to be.

3

Adopt mainstream models

A meal funded through a federal child nutrition program can be just as good as a meal paid for with cash. When providers think about how they might borrow from popular restaurant and culinary models they can reduce stigma and create a more enjoyable experience for participants.

4

Tap into technology

Using technology in a smart way can make processes easier or enable program providers to reach more people.

5

Reach more people with ideas that work

Once an idea has proven to be successful, find ways to disseminate learnings and bring the idea to scale.

6

Take a holistic approach

Developing programs and strategies that address the root cause of hunger or tackle poverty's multiple consequences can make a significant difference in the lives of families in need.

Breakthrough Idea 1: Engage end-users in design

Human-centered design is an important tool of successful innovators. Taking a human-centered approach to innovation ensures that you are tackling the right problems and developing solutions that meet the needs of target families and communities. Organizations that take the time to consider what makes their community unique develop good programs. Teams that take it a step further by going out into their communities to actively design new bodies of work with the families they hope to support develop great programs.

This idea showed up often in the survey. We heard from preschool teachers who involve students in monthly menu-planning, food banks that hold teen focus groups, and state agencies that engage families and program providers in their planning process. While the approaches used to understand participants' needs and collect feedback were different, the takeaway was the same: you can't solve what you don't understand.

Here are examples of how two organizations—Great Plains Food Bank, a nonprofit that shifted their mobile pantry to a drive-thru model, and San Francisco Unified, a school district that involves students in redesigning school meals—each used input from their intended end-users to strengthen and streamline their programs.

A Drive-Through Food Pantry

Great Plains Food Bank (Fargo, North Dakota)

When Great Plains Food Bank opened its mobile pantry in 2009, it was a targeted initiative that served approximately 2,417 households across three counties in North Dakota. Initially, the process worked smoothly.



Every other month, staff and volunteers parked a semi-trailer truck at one of eight designated distribution sites—usually the parking lot of a church, fire hall, or school—and residents drove as far as 45 miles to receive a pre-packaged box of food handed out by volunteers.

By the following year, however, Melissa Sobolik, director of Great Plains' Ending Hunger 2.0 initiative, noticed a decline in participation. By 2010, the number of households served at the same eight sites had dropped to 1,875. To understand why, she and her team of colleagues went straight to their target market.

"We started asking clients what were the barriers or what would they like to see, and we heard from seniors that they couldn't carry the boxes [of food] to their car. They were too heavy. So we knew we had to overcome that," said Sobolik. "The other thing was the weather. It

was really hot or it was cold and snowy, and people just didn't want to stand outside." In a place where temperatures can bottom into the single digits in the winter, it was a legitimate concern. And, Sobolik added, because of pride and stigma, clients didn't want to be seen standing outside of the truck.

Great Plains' innovative solution to hunger had to get more innovative. It took about six months to revamp the program into what it is now: a drive-thru mobile pantry. Clients never have to get out of their cars, eliminating issues with weather, heavy lifting and the worry of embarrassment.

An army of 5,400 diligent volunteers lift and deposit the 30-pound boxes containing cereal, canned fruits and vegetables, pasta, and equal parts perishables and produce into clients' trunks and back seats.

Just as important, the high turnout for each food pantry pop-up helps convince skeptical community leaders how widespread the need is. "People don't always see hunger, so we decided to do a mobile in a small town in northern North Dakota, 14 miles from the Canadian border and very close to an Indian reservation. We filled our truck with 400 pre-packed food boxes and when we got there, there were 511 cars in line," Sobolik said. That day, they served 1,401 people in a town of 700 residents.

Great Plains served 3,272 households at 21 mobile sites in 2018 and conducted a survey to measure the program's capacity. Clients reported using a food pantry a little more than eight times per year. The average annual income of clients was \$17,690, and 46 percent reported regularly skipping meals because of food scarcity. Some people who need help aren't comfortable asking for it, and others don't know where to get it.

"When I first set this mobile up, I called a church and said, 'Can we use your parking lot?' And of course they said, 'Absolutely, but bring a book. There's no hunger in our community.' We still went," said Sobolik, "and the community and church leaders really saw that there was such a huge need. People were driving over 80 miles to come and get a little food box. Before that, they had nothing." Once they saw the turnout, community leaders applied for grants to build a food pantry. "We don't need to go there anymore. That's the best possible solution—the community sees it as an issue, steps up and addresses it head-on," she said.

Great Plains' innovative solution to hunger had to get more innovative.

Looking to put this into action? Here are some easy ways you can engage end users in your program design:



1 Keep a pulse on your community. This can be everything from a casual conversation to interviews with the families and individuals you serve.



2 Approach ideas borrowed from another community with a healthy mix of caution and curiosity.



3 Add questions to program evaluation surveys focused on user experience.

New Cafeterias—Designed by Students

San Francisco Unified School District's Future Dining Experience (San Francisco, California)

A restaurant's success relies on more than just the food; the customer service, the layout and design of the space, and the overall dining experience also matter. The same is true of school meal programs. But sometimes the cafeteria setting, the meal quality, and reputation of school lunch can be barriers to participation. "It varies from community to community, but the cafeteria is where the poor kids go to eat, so

to speak," said Jennifer LeBarre, Executive Director of Student Nutrition Services at San Francisco Unified School District. "That's what causes the stigma, and then a lot of times too you have the teachers, unfortunately, who are bad-mouthing the food as well. Then the students think, 'If the teachers say it's bad that I have to eat it, what does that say about me?'"

Twenty years ago, San Francisco Unified School District—a collective of more than 100 schools in both the city and the county—switched from preparing food themselves to a contractor that provides prepackaged meals made of high-quality ingredients. Today, these schools serve 33,500 meals per day at 115 schools. But kids—

and the culture at large—have a history of looking down at school lunch. That can embarrass kids who have no other choices. This isn't just a San Francisco thing. It's a belief that's permeated school cultures across the country, and in districts that serve prepackaged food, that stigma is even more complicated.

"There was a need to address a lot of the concerns that were happening in the school district," she said. "For example, the places where students were asked to eat were not very welcoming and there were issues with how the food was perceived. A lot of the work that has been moving us forward is really around the space redesigns."

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Following the tenets of human-centered design, the school district implemented a new approach known as the Future Dining Experience in 2013 to make long-term changes to the school meal program and give students a voice. The District engaged students, parents, educators, and nutrition staff to rethink the school food system, including spaces, technology, operations, and overall dining experience. They also made students an active part of the decision-making leadership for each cafeteria redesign. Twenty-three dining spaces have been painted, outfitted with graphics and beautified since 2014.

Throughout each project, administrators ask students to provide feedback on the menus, conduct taste tests and engage them with questions:



What does it feel like to be in the cafeteria now?

What do you want the cafeteria to be like?

What's the purpose of it?

What would get you to enjoy the cafeteria more?

Students meet with administrators weekly in a curriculum that's both structured and self-affirming for its participants. This year, for the first time, four of those students attended a legislative action conference in Washington, D.C. to advocate for school meals and the changes they want to see federal legislators make. LeBarre said, "We're really trying to get the students involved to lend voice to the people who need to hear it, which are not just us at the local level, but the people at the state and federal levels who are making decisions for them."



Breakthrough Idea 2: Find and feed kids where they are

For many families—especially those with young kids—what’s served at dinner sometimes comes down to what’s easiest. When kids make choices on their own, the same logic often applies.

From the survey, we learned that a simple shift in thinking may quickly improve program reach. By thinking through where kids are most likely to be, program providers can minimize barriers to reaching them with the food they need. This idea was popular across all types of programs. Whether it’s making a neighbor’s front yard a summer meal site or opting into breakfast in the classroom, this idea is all about understanding where kids already plan to spend most of their time and finding creative ways to bring food there.

Here we share how two organizations—Kaleva Norman School District, which created a breakfast on the bus program, and Daily Table, a nonprofit grocery store—make sure the meals they provide are convenient and accessible.

Serving Breakfast on the Bus Kaleva Norman Dickson School District (Brethren, Michigan)

Recognizing the benefits of breakfast, and the barriers some students face in accessing it, schools across the country are making breakfast a part of the school day. Serving breakfast in the classroom is a proven model for expanding access to a healthy breakfast and reducing stigma associated with some cafeteria models. Yet in 2013, almost 40 percent of students in Brethren, Michigan were still missing breakfast, despite it being available in classrooms every school day. To be on time for their off-site career tech classes at Wexford-Missaukee ISD Career Tech Center, they had to leave school at 8 a.m., before attendance was even taken, for a 30-minute bus ride through a rural stretch of Manistee County, Michigan.

Because nearly half of the kids at Brethren are from low-income households, food services director Tim Klenow knew that many of the school’s 170 students were at risk of missing that first meal of the day.

Some already trek an hour or more to get to school, so if they don’t eat something before they leave home, they may have to wait hours until lunch.

Rather than spend half the day in a fog of hunger, Klenow got the approval from the state to serve breakfast on the bus to ensure that all kids had the food they needed.

“Just like we do in the classroom, we use milk coolers and totes with dry ingredients and boil bags with hot ingredients. We put the same thing on the bus and the kids open everything up. We use a check-off sheet with their names, teacher and weekday, just like we do in the classroom,” said Klenow. “The only difference is the bus driver is marking their names off for the day instead of the teacher. Then, when they come back at lunchtime, they bring in the totes and the cashier puts the meals into the point of sale computer system.”

Bus drivers agreed to take on the extra task of marking students’ names on the list. Without their help to track the number of items distributed, Klenow says, he and his team wouldn’t be able to file for meal reimbursement. In return for the drivers’ willingness to assist in the administration of breakfast on the bus, Klenow is careful to supply foods that are as travel-friendly and accident-proof as possible.

“We do cereal and milk, but we can’t do the bowl cups like we can at school in the classrooms,” he said. “So we do pouches, cereal bars, things that are handy and not something that you would have to eat on a table. You don’t want to make a mess or spills on the bus to create more work for the bus driver than you have to, so it can’t be things that are messy.” Superintendent Marlen Cordes praised Klenow for navigating the idea from implementation to its current state of success. Most important, no one has to miss the bus or miss a meal.



TIPS & TRICKS

for identifying
new ways to find
and feed kids
where they are:

1

ASK THE KIDS

in your network what a typical day looks like for them and where they eat most of their meals.

2

WORK WITH THE CITY

to understand where kids spend their time and get permission to run programming at new, creative locations.

3

THINK LIKE A KID.

Are there places you would have hung out that are currently underutilized?

Take and Bake meals at a Nonprofit Grocery Store Daily Table (Dorchester, Massachusetts)

In some low-income communities, there are limited options for parents attempting to purchase healthy foods for their children. After a long

day of working, job searching, or managing a household, many caregivers are exhausted at just the thought of cooking dinner. Daily Table, a not-for-profit grocery store, provides an alternative for families in Dorchester, a neighborhood in Boston, MA.

“Plenty of working parents struggle to find time to cook—whether you’re a SNAP recipient or you’re making a million dollars a year. If you’re on the lower end of the spectrum, you don’t have the money to choose healthy food,” said Michael Malmberg, the chief operating officer for Daily Table. “From the beginning, we established a commissary kitchen where we produce made-from-scratch meals that are healthy and delicious at a rate cost-competitive with fast food.”

Doug Rauch, a former president for Trader Joe’s, opened Daily Table in 2015 to stock fresh produce and grocery items priced to be affordable for people on any budget. In addition, the store stocks only products that meet their preferred dietary guidelines, as recommended by a leading group of nutrition experts from the Harvard School of Public Health and Boston Children’s Hospital.

Dorchester is a diverse community of Black, Polish, Irish, Caribbean, Latino and Southeast Asian Americans. It’s been chronically underserved by grocery stores and overserved by quickie marts. This can make it harder for families to eat near their home. The USDA has defined communities like Dorchester as “food deserts” because of their limited access to quality foods, but Malmberg and his Daily Table colleagues don’t use that term.

“There’s not a calorie shortage in America. You can buy chips, you can buy hot Cheetos, you can buy Pepsi, you can buy cookies, snacks, or McDonald’s just about anywhere, including low-income neighborhoods. There’s a shortage of nutrition,” he explained.

“Healthy food is not necessarily geographically inaccessible but it is economically inaccessible. You could live next door to a Whole Foods where there’s all sorts of fresh produce, but it might as well be 100 miles away if you’re low-income.”

Many people who qualify for food assistance don’t take advantage of federal nutrition programs. It’s primarily about dignity, says Malmberg. “People don’t want a handout. They want to have agency for their own lives and be able to provide for their own family, so we really want to flip the power dynamic. We’re a food access organization masquerading as a retail store.”

For that reason, prepared meals at Daily Table are priced to compete with fast food, making it easier for families to eat healthier within their means. Paying specific attention to providing stellar customer service, Rauch had conversations with focus groups and people in the community to learn what they wanted. Fresh, affordable produce is great, they told him, but what the community really needs is fast, convenient healthy food.

To fill the gap, Daily Table stocks an intentional selection of SNAP-eligible foods that are lower-sodium, low-sugar and generally healthier. Daily Table leadership does a lot of comparison shopping for produce, milk and other products to keep prices affordable.

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“We’re always close to or match the best price in town,” said Malmberg. “On certain items, we’re about 70 percent the price that you would find elsewhere.”

Because federal USDA standards prohibit SNAP recipients from purchasing hot foods with an EBT card, prepared foods are chilled and packaged, ready for customers to take them home, heat them up, and make dinnertime healthier *and* easier. The model provides families with increased options and makes it easier for families to eat meals where most of us do—at home.

“We have a selection of sandwiches, salads, smoothies and wraps for lunch as well as proteins, sides, soups, and composed meals that are heat-and-eat,” said Malmberg. “We also have a few super SNAP-friendly items such as a four-ounce garden salad for \$1.99. We sell a two-piece roasted chicken meal with vegetables and rice. That’s \$1.99 too. Then we have things that are a little fancier, like a jerk fish for \$4.99 with a vegetable and rice.” Even those pricier meals still cost less than a value meal at McDonald’s, he adds.

Breakthrough Idea 3: Adopt mainstream models

Mainstream models are popular for a reason: they work. For providers in search of fresh ideas, borrowing from commercial restaurants and retailers can offer new ways to reach kids.

This approach also normalizes federal child nutrition programs by tapping into more of what kids love, reducing stigma and improving user experience. This matters; because with kids, enthusiasm is almost always contagious.

This idea stood out because, in many ways, it is about dignity and respect. We saw it when food service directors changed their menus to be more consistent with what kids are excited about eating, when organizations considered the work schedules of the families they serve, and when programs changed their policies to allow children and adults to eat, even though it created an additional cost.

Here, we take a look at the Social Innovation Laboratory, a nonprofit that created a pop-up, Chipotle-style restaurant franchise to offer summer meals, and Feeding Children Everywhere, an organization that transitioned from traditional meal packing to online distribution of low-cost meal delivery kits using a mobile and web app.

A Pop-Up Restaurant—Just For Summer Social Innovation Laboratory (Emporia, Kansas)

On any given day in the summer, volunteers and staff across the country get ready to serve free summer meals in high need communities. For volunteers in Strong City, Kansas, the meal prep looked different than that of most traditional summer meal programs. Instead of serving one meal, volunteers diced and chopped proteins and vegetables so customers could order custom-made salads, burritos and rice bowls served assembly-line style.



If the format sounds familiar to you, it's because it probably is. Social Innovation Laboratory, the organization that launched and manages That Pop-Up Restaurant, borrowed the streamlined ordering process and menu of responsibly sourced ingredients from Chipotle and similar restaurant venues. Chipotle is clearly a leader in the fast-casual restaurant market and it offered the perfect model when the Social Innovation Laboratory team was preparing to implement a summer meal program for kids.

"I think we come to innovation by looking at the problem we're trying to solve. We've been thinking about doing some experimentation as we move forward," said Matthew Shephard, founder of the Social Innovation Laboratory. "Most traditional summer meal programs are kind of like mom's kitchen. You get what you get or you don't eat, right? Here, you can come and order your food customized whatever way you want. That really makes it more attractive to the youth and everybody else to get what they actually want to eat instead of just what's being offered. And because you know it's delicious, you can't beat that."

**“
We've actually ended up selling more adult meals than we gave away in kids' meals, which is fine because it makes the program really sustainable.”**

To serve a rural community of 1,200 in Strong City, Shephard and his team conducted initial research to find out what's been done before and how they could improve on their idea. The concept of operating a summer meal program like a restaurant was new, so they field-tested it like all of their other ideas. Would it actually work in the real world? Who would be their partners? Of course, because the summer meal program is federally funded, innovating also required a lot of monitoring to make sure they wouldn't be breaking any rules along the way.

While the primary audience is food-insecure children, one challenge some summer meal programs face is that caregivers do not typically get to eat with their children. "It's a

challenge when parents bring their kids to summer meal programs and aren't able to eat. So we serve all adults, including a large contingent of adults that didn't necessarily have kids," he said. The program operates



just like a restaurant where kids 18 and under eat for free and adults pay \$5 for a meal. "We've actually ended up selling more adult meals than we gave away in kids' meals, which is fine because it makes the program really sustainable," said Shephard.

That Pop-Up Restaurant first launched at a local food stand rented from a retired business owner who only used it for catering. Now in its third year, the program has partnered with the local government in Strong City for free space in a public building to serve customers three nights a week during prime dinner hours. The Social Innovation Laboratory buys and prepares the food and, because of the program income, they've been able to open a second location and hire paid site administrators to oversee meal prep.

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The Chipotle food-serving system works for two reasons, says Shephard. “One is because it's very nutritious,” he explains. “The only thing that's pre-manufactured is the tortilla shells. We use lean beef and chicken, and beans as a veggie option, and we have tons of vegetables. There's

no processed food or junk in there. Everything is fresh.” The other reason, he adds, is the efficiency of preparing different combinations of tastes. “Having a common set of eight ingredients allowed us to prepare at least three different kinds of meals. You can get a rice bowl, a salad or a burrito, and mix those ingredients in different ways.”

Starting small can be smart. “In our first year, we did two nights a week, 5-7 p.m., so it wasn't overwhelming,” said Shephard. “We had the opportunity to make mistakes and figure out what works and doesn't work. We expanded the number of meal nights that we do, but I would say starting small is a good process.”

A Virtual Food Bank

Feeding Children Everywhere (Longwood, Florida)

Two years ago, Dave Green had a revelation. He and his staff at Feeding Children Everywhere looked at the data from the millions of meals they had distributed to families and individuals in need across the U.S. and 52 other countries. To measure the effectiveness of the organization's active hunger projects, he asked some hard questions about the impact they were making. “We met and talked with people we were serving and ultimately realized that there's a gap we hadn't innovated on in 50-60 years,” Green said. “The food bank and the food pantry model is a noble and great thing, but we kept coming across a lot of access issues, whether it was people in rural areas or people in urban communities in food deserts.”

Around that time, the commercial meal kit delivery market had exploded with industry experts predicting continued growth in the next 10 years. Green believed if meal delivery could give so many busy individuals and families the ingredients to eat healthier meals

ASK AN EXPERT



We asked Cyndie Story, a chef who deploys teams of food service experts across the country to train cafeteria staff to improve the dining experience for kids, what she thought of this bold idea. Her take? The food we serve and how we serve it is an opportunity to make the dining experience fun for kids. When they learn how to eat for their health, as well as their enjoyment, their ability to make smart eating choices is solidified early in life.

at home, it could also bridge food access for households in need. He studied leaders in business innovation—how they operationalized their processes, how they applied new technology—and made notes for Feeding Children Everywhere's new project, though he wasn't quite sure what it was going to be yet.

“We looked at what some of the leading innovators were doing in our time,” explained Green. “We looked at Amazon's advancements in supply chain and distribution, specifically for home delivery. We looked at what Uber did with connecting people to short-term transportation through a mobile app. Their model is a radical thing that has changed the world. We looked at companies like Blue Apron and Hello Fresh and what they were doing on the meal kit delivery side. We said ‘Hey, what if we took some of the best pieces from each of those ideas and reinvented how we look at food assistance in America?’”

The idea took form as a mobile app designed to help low-income families get the food they need. Now available in all 50 states, users can shop for free groceries, paying just a small shipping cost to receive meal kits and grocery items, including fresh produce, in three business days. The mix of users is a telling story about hunger in America: 35 percent of the households, depending on what part of the country

they're in, have at least one child, 21 percent includes at least one senior, 12 percent have a military veteran and 11 percent have someone with a disability. There are no income limits or stipulations, nor are there long, burdensome applications to fill out.

It's a different approach for the nonprofit world, says Green, who adds that charging a customer or client a little bit of money to get a massive amount of value could actually be a type of social innovation that helps solve housing and other systemic challenges.

"Our real goal is to just make groceries more affordable, to help people get food for pennies on the dollar, whether somebody makes \$80,000 a year in San Francisco for a family of four and can't pay their rent or if they make \$20,000 a year in Alabama and can't pay their rent," explained Green. "Either one of those—whether they're on SNAP or not on SNAP—aren't qualifiers for us anymore because they're actually participating in it financially. That was kind of a game-changer for us when it stopped feeling food assistance-oriented and a lot more consumer behavior-oriented. We learned that the shame factor is a reason so many people live silently with hunger...It's a much more empowering approach."



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Breakthrough Idea 4: Tap into technology

Innovation doesn't depend on technology. But technology, used smartly, can open up new solutions to old problems. For providers, new technologies can streamline paperwork. For participants, the same technologies can make it easier to identify services available.

From the survey, we learned that when it comes to technology, the innovations can be incremental or radical. We heard from school districts using simple technology in the classroom to assist with meal counts, nonprofits using texting services to cross-promote federal programs, and food banks using mobile applications to find and donate unused food.

Here we examine two cases: Fresh EBT by Propel, an app that allows SNAP participants to better manage their balances and budgets, and Farmhouse Market, a membership-based grocery store in rural Minnesota that uses technology to cut out the biggest cost - employees.

An App for SNAP

Fresh EBT by Propel (Brooklyn, New York)

When bank customers want to confirm the most current balance in their checking account or need to access other financial services, they have numerous apps to choose from. Historically, people participating in SNAP have not had the same luxury. The team at Propel is changing that.

"There are many banking apps that provide a user-friendly way to access your financial accounts aggregated into one place," said Stacy Taylor, head of policy and partnerships for the New York City-based startup. "Similar technology can be applied to support customers who have been left out of these services in the past, specifically the millions of Americans who are accessing government benefits. By using resources they're already using we can support a more dignified and modern customer experience."

Fresh EBT is a tangible product of that vision. In interviews conducted during its development process, Taylor and the Propel team heard over and over again from SNAP customers about the inconveniences of managing their available benefits.

“We talked to lots of moms who had the 1-800 number and all the prompts memorized, just to hear they have \$111.82 remaining on their card this month. We thought there must be a better way,” said Taylor. In response, the core feature of the Fresh EBT app is an easier way for end-users to check and manage their SNAP balance. The free app launched in 2016 to a growing number of users, now at two million people across all 50 states, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and Puerto Rico.

The technology was able to scale quickly because it didn't require a policy change, a full-system makeover or even an operational shift. It's considered a skin on top of the preexisting EBT processor system, similar to those in financial services that allow third-party companies with a consumer focus to sit on top of other financial services. “While some companies aim for disruption, we don't see it that way at all,” explained Taylor. “We are here to complement and to bring additional resources to the existing SNAP and EBT system. We do our work at Propel because we want to supplement those programs and help them achieve their promise: to provide critical supports for low-income Americans.”

On top of connecting users with information about SNAP benefits, Fresh EBT also offers tools that let users set up budgets, connect with money saving services, and employment opportunities. “About a year ago, we reorganized content into three categories: manage, save, and earn - to access your balance and budget limited dollars, to find coupons and discounted services and to find and apply for income generating opportunities,” continued Taylor. “In the last year,

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We talked to lots of moms who had the 1-800 number and all the prompts memorized, just to hear they have \$111.82 remaining on their card this month. We thought there must be a better way.”

SNAP participants have clipped over \$20 million in coupon savings and submitted more than 75,000 job applications via Fresh EBT.”

The Propel team knows that when it comes to user experience, they have to think about the whole financial picture. “Beyond looking at SNAP usage during the month, we also look at the number of coupons requested and the number of job applications submitted as success metrics,” said Taylor. “That's really our purpose—to provide a tool to make it easier for participants to access their own financial information alongside resources, services, and money-saving opportunities to improve financial health.”

It seems like the approach is working. Common Cents, a behavioral economics lab, and an economist from Harvard, who both independently studied the service, found that Fresh EBT helped people stretch their SNAP dollars to last longer throughout the month.

A Nonprofit Grocery Store— With No Workers Farmhouse Market (New Prague, Minnesota)

Here's something unusual: a grocery store that has served its small-town Minnesota community for three and a half years with no employees and, at least for the immediate future, no plans to hire any.

Founded by Kendra Rasmusson and her husband, Paul, Farmhouse Market is a 650-square-foot grocery store that partners with local farmers, food producers and natural food distributors to stock quality, organic, and local items. Its specialty in locally sourced foods was inspired by her then two-year-old daughter's epilepsy diagnosis and the Rasmussons' research on healthy diet alterations that could help minimize seizures.



The small, rural community where she was born and raised inspired the model for a self-sustaining grocery store. “My husband and I got married and lived in the Twin Cities, and decided to move back to my hometown,” Rasmusson explained. “So for us, there was one grocery store on the outer part of the town, but there was really nothing in the downtown heart of the area. We originally set out to have a standard staffed grocery store but when we started plugging in the numbers, the number of hours needed to staff the place never added up. Instead of quitting the mission, we had to pivot and think about technology.”



If fitness centers are open 24/7 and members use key cards to access them, why couldn't that same system work for a grocery store?"

If fitness centers are open 24/7 and members use key cards to access them, why couldn't that same system work for a grocery store? In their initial research, the husband-and-wife team conducted a digital survey to determine the need in their community and gauge initial interest in the market. Before the store even opened, they had 150 registered members.

The innovation that drives Farmhouse Market is two-fold: how to best serve customers and how to make the store self-sustaining. With three children and two jobs between them, neither Rasmusson had the luxury of time or the discretionary budget to be at the store for

a full day. The membership model gives them flexibility but also allows customers to feel a sense of shared ownership.

“Members get a key card so they can let themselves in 24/7,” Rasmusson explained. “Lights are motion-activated. We have a tablet checkout with a touch screen and barcode scanner. People can let themselves in any time of day, shop on their own, check out on their own, and pay with a credit or debit card at the checkout. Our business model connects our local community to agriculture, to farmers in a convenient way, and we try to keep our costs really affordable because we're removing a lot of the expensive elements from our operating costs.”

Members pay a \$79 one-time initiation fee plus an annual membership renewal of \$20 for full-stop access as well as a 5 percent discount on every purchase. There's a code of conduct members must agree to honor, a set of expectations that Rasmusson put in place to protect the market's integrity. But members take care of it like it's their own, she says, because they feel invested in it and in supporting their local community. Their continued involvement is the key to Farmhouse Market's longevity.

The store is also open to the public for three hours every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Rasmusson didn't want to exclude anyone who may not be able to afford a membership. She works a few hours each day, while volunteers—including her parents—receive deliveries, stock shelves and help customers check out.

Farmhouse Market doesn't currently accept EBT due to cost associated with in-store equipment, but they're working on it. Rasmusson is applying for grants to cover the cost because if there's a food need, she wants to be sure they're meeting it. “We do have people reaching out from the community who would like to participate in that way and presently we don't have a way to help, but we really want to,” she added.

They've received a lot of attention from people interested in replicating, even expanding their model. Some have advised Rasmusson to create an app. Others have suggested they franchise or consult. She's not yet sure which makes the best financial sense if any makes sense at all. But for some communities, she said, the Farmhouse Market concept could work as a low-cost food solution.

“I think in the larger scope, our business model could be applied to communities with a large hunger problem because if they don't have access to healthy, fresh food, that's a detriment to health,” said Rasmusson. “A model like ours could be applied in communities to provide affordable, healthy food. That's what our guiding mission is.”



Breakthrough Idea 5: Reach more people with ideas that work

Innovation isn't just about coming up with something new. Often, it's about improving an existing program or product or, as this theme

highlights, figuring out how to reach more people after a model has proven to be successful. Whether the goal is to increase participation in a program that already reaches many or bringing an original, smaller idea to scale, many innovators grapple with how to reach more people after proving that something works.

In the survey, we heard from organizations attempting to scale in creative ways, from creating a new membership organization to data matching. The most successful organizations often employed methods that reached more people without increasing their workload.

The organizations highlighted in this section, Hunger Free Oklahoma and Benefits Data Trust, focused their innovation efforts on two existing federal nutrition programs: SNAP and WIC. While millions of people already participate in these programs, there are still many eligible people who are not enrolled. These organizations developed creative methods to reach more families in need.

SNAP in Schools Hunger Free Oklahoma (Tulsa, Oklahoma)

When kids return to the classroom at the start of a new year, they are not the only ones with assignments. Parents, too, find that the first few days are jam-packed with things to do and forms to fill out. For a group of parents in Oklahoma last year, among those back-to-school activities and paperwork was information on how to enroll in SNAP onsite.

The program started as an idea in May 2017 when the team at Hunger Free Oklahoma, a nonprofit that seeks to eliminate hunger by improving systems, policies, and practices, was struck by their state's relatively low SNAP participation. "SNAP participation in Oklahoma is estimated to be between 75 percent and 82 percent of eligible participants," explained Chris Bernard, the Executive Director at Hunger Free Oklahoma. "We know from direct certification rates and free lunch rates that there are many families with children in school who could qualify for SNAP, but are not currently enrolled. So, schools doing SNAP outreach made perfect sense."

Following a set of conversations with state leaders working in both policy and education, the Hunger Free Oklahoma team set out to better understand why families were not enrolling in the program at higher levels. They started with a series of five focus groups.

Families were quick to list the same deterrents and motivators when it came to applying for SNAP. Stigma and misinformation were the biggest hurdles for most families, but families also identified changes that would make it easier for them to apply for benefits. "Most families said that they would be more likely to apply or more comfortable applying if they could complete the application or receive assistance in places where they already went or were more comfortable being than a government office" recalled Richard Comeau, program director at the nonprofit.

The Hunger Free Oklahoma team hypothesized that more families would apply if they came up with a way to meet families on their turf.

"Schools understood the benefits immediately," revealed Comeau. "Oklahoma schools are always looking for wrap-around and support services to keep children engaged and prepared to learn and focus group families indicated that school staff were a trusted source of information." Once they convinced a few schools to try out their idea, the SNAP in Schools program was born.

In four Oklahoma school districts, school personnel completed a training focused on understanding food insecurity and SNAP, eligibility, applications, and program implementation in order to become SNAP specialists. Throughout the school year, they work across their schools



to promote the program, use data to identify families that might be eligible, and assist families one-on-one with their SNAP applications. “Every school implements it differently, but at a basic level the program is about creating access points in schools with knowledgeable staff who can walk a family through a pretty complicated application and support them afterwards if they have trouble navigating the process,” stated Treba Shyers, the project lead for SNAP in Schools.

While a partnership between a school district and an anti-hunger organization is unique, it also makes perfect sense. SNAP participation is not only good for kids, it is also good for schools. An increase in SNAP participation can be tied to an increase in federal funding for lower-income schools and, in some instances, makes it easier for schools to qualify for other budget relieving programs. According to Shyers, “In some rural schools, enrolling 15 families in SNAP could mean the difference between the school being able to serve meals for free to all students or having to charge. It is great to be able to help students and schools succeed.”

When it comes to reaching more families in need, this matters. Hunger Free Oklahoma has a small team. This creative partnership enables them to better achieve their goal of connecting more families to the services they need.

The team at Hunger Free Oklahoma has big plans for the future. While the first year of implementation focused on training school staff and creating access points, the upcoming year will focus on implementing innovative and data driven outreach techniques like an online screening and referral tool, targeted social media outreach resources for schools, and data matching projects to identify eligible families. At the end of the three-year pilot, Hunger Free Oklahoma plans to use the data collected to inform a future toolkit and standardized training that any school could implement. While they cannot do it alone, Hunger Free Oklahoma and the schools they are working with believe that the model is worth investing in. Comeau concluded, “People appreciate this, we’ve caught so many kids who are falling through the cracks—yes, at some level, every school should be doing this.”

Using Text Messages for WIC Outreach Benefits Data Trust (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

A simple text can do wonders for patient compliance when it comes to health care. Benefits Data Trust, a nonprofit that helps people live healthier, more independent lives by creating smarter ways to access essential benefits and services, had a hunch that the same approach could do more than get people to the dentist on time.

Inspired by learnings from other sectors, Benefits Data Trust set out to test their idea. If a text could get someone to the doctor, was there a chance the same approach could get someone to sign up for government services?

The team decided to focus their newest texting project on increasing enrollment in WIC, a public health program that provides nutrition education, nutritious foods, breastfeeding support and healthcare referrals for income-eligible women who are pregnant or post-partum, infants, and children up to age 5.

NOT SURE HOW TO PUT THIS WINNING IDEA INTO PRACTICE?



Think about individual buckets of work you do to make your model or program a reality. Consider if technology, a new partner, or someone on your team will be able to help you scale what you’re doing faster than if you stuck at it alone.

Based on what they had learned from other projects focused on text reminders, the team had a feeling that texts might work especially well with a WIC-eligible audience. “We knew that this was a younger population, so we assumed that the population would be heavy mobile users,” said Jess Maneely, policy analyst at Benefits Data Trust.



Opportunity for growth in WIC participation also drove their decision. According to USDA's most recent coverage report, in 2016, only 54.5 percent of those eligible participated in the program. The team at Benefits Data Trust saw this problem as an opportunity to help more people access the program.

In partnership with the state of Colorado and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, Benefits Data Trust launched their first test in 2018. They worked closely with the two state agencies respectively responsible for administering SNAP and WIC: the Colorado Department of Human Services and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

First, the pilot team had to identify a quick way to know who was eligible for WIC but not currently enrolled. Data shared by the Colorado Department of Human Services, the agency responsible for administering SNAP, proved to be the solution. The

team did an initial matching process with this data and another data file focused on WIC enrollment to determine the number of families enrolled in SNAP that were likely eligible for—but not participating in—WIC.

"If you're on SNAP and have a child under five, you are automatically income-eligible for WIC, meaning you don't have to provide documents that prove your income in order to certify for WIC," Maneely explained. She and her team identified about 20,000 families that were eligible for WIC, but not enrolled.

From there, they crafted simple text messages that encouraged families to apply. "One of the things our pilot tested was the message itself, stated Maneely. "A prominent barrier to benefits access is the lack of knowledge about government programs, coupled with a prevailing belief that benefits applications are too complicated to navigate. We wanted to know how families would respond if we told them at the onset: this program can help your family and is easier for you to enroll in than you may have thought. Are they more likely to follow through and actually enroll?"

When the pilot was complete, the team had learned three things.

- Matching participation data between SNAP and WIC is an effective way to identify families who are eligible for WIC but not participating.
- Modern communication methods work. Almost 80 percent of families in the pilot had a cell phone, which allowed the team to conduct outreach and communicate via text.
- And to the surprise of the team, text message-based outreach did not lead to higher enrollment rates. While caregivers were responsive to the texts, families that received text-based outreach ultimately did not enroll in WIC at a higher rate than families that received more traditional forms of outreach.

This last finding pushed the pilot team to iterate on their process to focus more heavily on appointment scheduling and enrollment in their ongoing work. They now have pilots in other states focused on messaging, streamlining the enrollment process, and expanding the outreach pool based on data from other federal programs. From their first pilot they learned that effective outreach is only the first step in increasing enrollment.

With the right model and effective systems in place, states can identify who needs WIC, effectively reach these families by text, and then streamline enrollment processes for those who they know are eligible. For Maneely and her team, this was always part of the plan. "When we developed the Colorado model, our hope was that it was the type of work states could take on and keep doing without us," she said. "We are now iterating variations of the Colorado model in three other states. The new pilots are still in progress, and we hope to have findings by the end of the year."



Innovation rarely goes according to plan. And sometimes you can learn more from a surprising outcome than one that's expected. Continuous learning is an important element to any innovation process. Whether a new body of work is a wild success or an obvious failure, there should always be something learned that you carry forward to your next idea.

Breakthrough Idea 6: Take a holistic approach

Families experiencing food insecurity are often experiencing financial insecurity more generally. That's why some of the most successful ideas are designed to address the root causes of hunger. Organizations that take this approach understand hunger as a symptom of poverty and focus their efforts on programs like employment opportunities that help families make ends meet.

Similarly, places considered "food deserts" often lack other resources. This explains why programs that address multiple consequences of poverty tend to make a significant difference in people's lives. These strategies might address issues like obesity, the educational achievement gap, or dental care alongside food insecurity.

From the survey, we heard from health care providers who do food insecurity screenings at every checkup, nonprofits that have partnered with school districts to enhance time in the classroom with food demonstrations, and food banks that have joined forces with medical clinics to think about how fresh produce can be prescribed along with more traditional medical treatments.

The social enterprise profiled first in this section, Emma's Torch, is a restaurant that provides paid culinary training to recent refugees. The second organization, Moshannon Valley YMCA, evolved its mobile meals program into a bus that delivered multiple services to communities in need.

A Culinary Training Program Turned Restaurant Emma's Torch (Brooklyn, New York)

Friendly hosts and an inviting atmosphere have made Emma's Torch a local favorite on the Brooklyn restaurant scene. But for the culinary team behind the concept, their work is about more than the food they serve; it is about dignity, respect, and sustainable impact. Emma's Torch is a nonprofit restaurant that provides top-notch culinary training to refugees while they manage a full-service restaurant.

It's a concept born from experience, explained Kerry Brodie, founder and proprietor of Emma's Torch. "I was volunteering at a homeless shelter while I was working in DC," she explained. "While I was there, I kept thinking about how we could work within the food system to do more for people than just feed them. I kept coming back to a larger question about how we might use food as a universal language to do something that has a larger or more lasting impact."

Since opening their doors in 2016, Emma's Torch has trained dozens of graduates and caught the attention of the press. Their impact is growing. Every month, a new cohort of students starts the 12-week program. As paid culinary apprentices, students make a living wage while completing 500 hours of culinary training.

But for Brodie, good isn't good enough. "We're never just staying the same. I think that the idea is never really done," she said. "We're constantly, constantly working on it. Early on we learned that it was not enough to teach students the hard skills." With an eye for continuous improvement, Brodie pushed the team to make simple changes to their program structure to add a renewed focus on a skill students seemed to lack: confidence. "We're seeing that students are going into the workforce so well equipped because before they worked with us, they didn't know how to advocate for themselves, they didn't feel like they deserved their spot there," she explained.

If their model focused exclusively on job training, there is no way the team at Emma's Torch could sustain their efforts. But, by pairing their programmatic work with full restaurant services, Emma's Torch is able to support the model and think about what might come next.

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Nonprofit by day and restaurant by night, Brodie explains that she combats hunger by addressing its root cause. “Technically speaking, we’re not an organization that’s combating hunger directly,” she explained. “But I think that everything is interconnected. When these students are able to access the job market, they’re also able to access financial independence. That allows them the financial ability to combat hunger for themselves and their families.”

A YMCA on Wheels

Moshannon Valley YMCA (Philipsburg, PA)

The Moshannon Valley YMCA knows how to feed kids in their community. They started their first nutrition-focused program back in 2004: summer meals. Mel Curtis, branch director of the Moshannon Valley YMCA, explained, “When we started out, we focused on how to reach high need areas and serving lunch.”



Once school is out, we know that the kids who rely on backpacks are not getting them. So all of a sudden, these kids would go from eating breakfast and lunch at school, backpacks on the weekend, to absolutely nothing in the summer.”

A few years later, they added a backpack program. Through the two programs, Curtis and his team served 500 meals a day in the summer and distributed 1,300 backpacks each week. But for Curtis, this wasn’t enough.

“I think that frustration was part of it,” he joked. It can be hard to reach kids in need with meals in the summer and the Moshannon Valley YMCA is no exception. The majority of Centre and Clearfield County, the two counties primarily served by the YMCA, are rural.

Curtis explained that most kids cannot drive themselves to a summer meal site. In a rural community, that lack of transportation makes a difference. It felt like no matter how many summer meal locations they operated, the unmet need would persist. “Once school is out, we know that the kids who rely on backpacks are not getting them. So all of a sudden, these



kids would go from eating breakfast and lunch at school, backpacks on the weekend, to absolutely nothing in the summer.”

Inspired by others, Curtis set out to launch a mobile meals program, where his team would deliver meals direct to kids in underserved pockets of the community. The first grant he applied for fell through. “We didn’t get it,” he stated bluntly. For some this may have felt like a door closing, but for Curtis, it was an opportunity to make what he had envisioned even better.

Curtis knew that if kids in the community could not access the food they needed, there was a good chance that they could not access other important things, like medical and dental services. “The Travelin’ Table” was born out of this idea.

In 2019, the YMCA acquired a brand new Bluebird bus from a donor that they retrofitted with a commercial kitchen and medical area. Designed to feed children throughout Centre and Clearfield Counties, the Travelin’ Table is a mobile meals bus that can do it all.

“It’s really multifaceted,” explained Curtis. What makes the Travelin’ Table different from most mobile meal programs is a partnership with Penn State Health Medical Group, who staff the medical area on the bus and provide preventive medical and dental services for kids and families that live near the route. “It’s like a free clinic for these kids,” Curtis elaborated.



Final Words

The responses to the survey and the examples people shared illustrate that, across the country, people are coming up with new and better ways to reach kids with healthy food. For some, the examples and approaches here might validate strategies they are already employing. Others might be inspired to try something new and incorporate one of the approaches described here into their current strategy for feeding kids.

Creative problem solving is easier when you have some sense of what has been tried, what seems to work, and a hunch for why some approaches work better than others. We hope the ideas highlighted might help you get started.

Across the ideas presented, one theme showed up in every strategy that worked: the best ideas were developed through an understanding of what people want and need.

- Daily Table came about because the founder conducted focus groups and learned from families that they wanted not only affordable produce, but healthy food that is also fast and convenient.
- Fresh EBT was developed because the founders heard moms describe the struggle to keep track of their monthly SNAP benefits.
- And, Hunger Free Oklahoma started SNAP in Schools in response to a call for convenience from caregivers and after learning that families trusted school administrators.

These programs and platforms work because they take participants' experiences seriously.

Doing anything new can feel daunting. But, at its most basic level, innovation is about understanding what might make people's lives better or easier, and then designing something that meets those needs. The people who work every day to understand what is successful and what isn't when it comes to connecting kids with the food they need are innovating. These individuals have a hunch about what families want for their kids, and about what might make their lives easier.

We bet you do too.

It is our hope that this report makes clear that innovation is for you and inspires you to make big or small changes to your programs to better meet the needs of kids and families.



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