



# INNOVATION BRIEF

## Free Adult Meals at Summer Meal Sites



Many caregivers value time spent eating together as a family. But, child nutrition programs like the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) can make it hard for families to do so. When it comes to summer meals, this means that some families are forced to choose between eating what they have left at home together or going to a summer meal site where only the kids will get a meal. Meriden Food and Nutrition Services, located in Meriden, Connecticut, had a hunch that for families in their community, being able to eat together would make a difference for the kids that they serve and for their summer meals program.

Led by the Director of Food and Nutrition, Susan Maffe, Meriden Food and Nutrition Services sought to test the assumption that serving free meals to adults and children at a summer meal site could improve user experience and increase program participation. In summer 2019, they implemented a pilot to test their idea. The pilot ran from June 10 to August 16, 2019, with free adult meals being served at seven open summer meal sites.

### IMPLEMENTATION

Before plans were finalized, Meriden Food and Nutrition Services reached out to their state agency for guidance on how to serve adult meals. Learnings from the call gave the team confidence on the proper way to count adult meals and set up program finances.

When it came to what to expect, the team was unsure how many adults would want a meal and how this would affect their staffing. The team was concerned that a sharp increase in participation would translate into a need for more employees. To minimize this concern, they decided to phase in free adult meals one site at a time. This approach allowed them to get a sense for how the model would impact their program and staffing needs before implementing the change across all sites.

Meriden Food and Nutrition Services put thought into where they would serve free adult meals. They ended up selecting seven open sites that were located in family-friendly spaces like parks adjacent to neighborhoods where they knew many kids lived, a green space located in the heart of downtown, and the local farmers market. To ensure that they had clean baseline data, four of the sites they selected served as sites in summer 2018.

## CHALLENGES

When Meriden Food and Nutrition Services designed the pilot they knew that in order to serve free adult meals, they would have to cover food costs. Federal regulation clearly dictates what the reimbursement for summer meals can cover. Money from the program must be used to fund food for kids, and a small portion can be used to cover administrative costs required to run the program. Food costs for meals served to anyone over 18 are not an allowable expense.

They were surprised, however, to learn that to be in compliance, they needed to reimburse themselves the full federal amount for each meal served to an adult, which includes food cost and the administrative expense. This increased their expected costs from \$1.50 to \$4.00 for every adult meal served.



## RESULTS

By the end of summer 2019, Meriden Food and Nutrition Services had successfully implemented the pilot. Data from the work illustrates that serving free adult meals may be a promising practice to improve user experience and increase participation at summer meal sites. In summer 2019, the team served over 45,000 lunches to the kids in their community, which was a 45 percent increase from summer 2018.

The Meriden Food and Nutrition Services team served free adult meals at all seven sites. Average Daily Participation (ADP) and implementation time varied. Collectively, they served 1,216 adult meals.

Site	Pilot Duration	Adult ADP
Site A	6 Weeks	12
Site B	4 Weeks	32
Site C	1 Week	17
Site D	6 Weeks (Saturdays only)	26
Site E	9 Weeks	15
Site F	8 Weeks	12
Site G	9 Weeks	4

Of the four sites where summer meals had been served the year before, participation increased at three of them.

Site	2018 Child ADP	2019 Child ADP	Percent Change
Site A	31	36	16%
Site B	50	84	68%
Site C	52	80	54%
Site D	97	87	-10%

Survey data from caregivers provides additional evidence that serving free adult meals may be tied to the increase in participation. When asked if they had been to a summer meal site before, 48 percent of caregivers selected a response that indicated that before this summer, they had not been to a summer site.

Furthermore, the survey data from caregivers provides evidence that serving adult meals improves their experience. When asked if they would rather go to a site that served meals to everyone or just kids, 94 percent of caregivers selected a response that indicated they would rather go to a site where everyone could eat.

Responses to open-ended questions provided insights into how adult meals improved families' experiences with summer meals. Caregivers contrasted their past experience with the program to their experience during the pilot. Previously, some explained, their kids felt bad or would not eat when parents were not allowed to eat. One mom explained, "Last year, all my kids felt guilty that they were the only ones eating. Even if parents were only able to get snacks and juice, they would be okay with it." Another confirmed, "Because sometimes the kids won't eat because parents not eating and they start trying to give you their food."

In addition to alleviating negative feelings, some caregivers explained that when they could all eat together summer meals became an enjoyable way for families to spend time together. One mom wrote, "It's more fun when kids and parents are eating together." A second agreed, stating that, "It's a great environment and healthy to be around family and eat together." Another went on to explain that summer meals became an opportunity for them to spend time with other families, noting, "Because we could come as a family and all eat. It was convenient, and other families thought so too. So we all came more often and we created a little community of our own."

Finally, some caregivers expressed that they also need food. One caregiver explained, "...there are many of us that don't have enough to feed ourselves as adults. Kids are our main priorities." Another stated, "There are times I don't make enough money to fill my fridge and only have enough for my kids to eat." And another responded, "Parents get hungry too. Also, pregnant girls need to eat."

All five site supervisors thought that serving free adult meals improved the experience families had at their sites and four out of five explained that it also improved their own experience serving summer meals. One site supervisor explained that she had a more positive experience serving free adult meals this summer compared to last because "they [the families] were happy to be able to sit with their child and eat. Also, they stayed longer on-site so the child could play."

## DISCUSSION

Meriden Food and Nutrition Services' pilot suggests that families are more willing to engage with the summer meals program when they know that everyone in their family will be able to get a meal.

Additionally, Meriden Food and Nutrition Services found that it was relatively easy to serve adult meals without added capacity. When the pilot was in operation, Meriden Food and Nutrition Services served one adult meal for every three meals they served to children and were able to serve the same meal to adults that they would a child. While they did see an overall increase in program participation, the increase was not so dramatic that the program became unmanageable. When sponsors are able to streamline kitchen operations and expect to see moderate gains in participation, sites should be able to operate without additional support.

**This idea was piloted in partnership with No Kid Hungry through The Test Kitchen, a concept accelerator designed to help nonprofits, schools, faith organizations, and local governments turn their best ideas into validated strategies and promising practices. To learn more about this pilot or how you can test your own idea, reach out to [innovation@strength.org](mailto:innovation@strength.org)**

Based on the pilot success and the relative ease associated with implementation, serving adult meals may be an effective strategy for sponsors to adopt across the country. That said, cost associated with the model would likely be a barrier for some sponsors. There is limited guidance from USDA on how to serve adult meals in compliance with federal law. This makes it especially important that sponsors have a clear understanding of what costs they need to cover, and a plan for where these funds will come from before summer starts.

## TIPS AND TRICKS

During their planning process and throughout the summer, Meriden Food and Nutrition Services learned a handful of tips and tricks to consider when it comes to implementing adult meals:

1. Before moving forward with any new model, sponsors should reach out to their state agency to receive guidance. Doing this early gives sponsors time to adapt their plans without extending pilot timelines.
2. Have a clear understanding of reimbursement requirements and make a plan to cover those costs early. Applying for grant funds is just one option. If sponsors plan ahead they can find creative ways to cover costs associated with free meals like accepting donations throughout the year or through a la carte sales.
3. While the pilot in Meriden was focused on free adult meals, sponsors could also experiment with paid or pay-what-you-can adult meals. It is possible that sponsors would see similar outcomes with these models, and because at least some portion of the cost would be covered, sponsors would carry less responsibility for securing additional funds.