

## Designing a Meals Program that Reaches Every Child

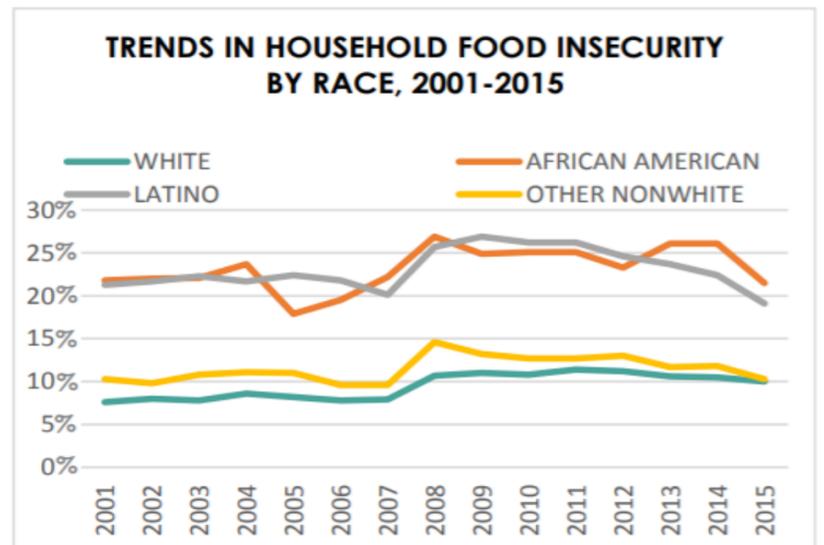
### A Self-Assessment Tool

We know that hunger disproportionately affects Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities (see graph below), yet we also know that our programs are not always designed in partnership with these communities, often leaving their needs unmet. Use the questions below as prompts to take a step back and evaluate whether your meal program is designed to reach every child in your community. We encourage you to pose these questions to your full team and solicit feedback from all, especially those working closest with families *and* families themselves. These questions are meant to be a starting place for ongoing conversations that we should all be having about how we can disrupt systemic racism as an anti-hunger community and design better meals programs that reach every child.

As you identify barriers families, teens, and younger children may face in accessing your meals program, think critically about how you can work with your team and your community to minimize hurdles in ways that promote dignity and equitable access. You may recognize that your communications advertising your meal program are in English, but there are families in your community who primarily speak Spanish. To support these families, you might partner with a community organization that works directly with the Spanish-speaking community to sit on your board or open their own summer meal site. Maybe you also hire someone from the community to translate your communications, to staff a meal site, and to have a seat at your organization's decision-making table.

## Questions to Reflect On

- 1. Who might your meals program be missing?** Compare your current participation to a typical school day or summer day. Then, look beyond the numbers to identify barriers that may drive the differences. Think about transportation, language, and cultural barriers. Is demographic data available? If so, disaggregating data by race/ethnicity can help you identify disparities in access. If demographic data is not available, consider collecting it. Read the article, [Respectful Collection of Demographic Data](#) by Sarai Rosenberg.
- 2. Do staff at sites represent the communities you hope to reach?** The people serving meals can make a big difference for how comfortable kids, teens and their families feel at meal sites. Also consider the relationships staff have with the community and food served. Do community members trust your team? Are you serving culturally appropriate meals? If the answer is no, consider hiring site staff who reflect the community you are trying to reach.
- 3. Do you have existing relationships within the communities you may not be reaching? If not, how can you authentically build new relationships?** Relationships could be with community organizations, community leaders, or even individual people. When you reach out to others to build new relationships, be sensitive to the work they are already doing, the ask that you are making, and the timing of your outreach. To build authentic relationships, it is important that communication is ongoing, rather than just when you need something. Reach out before you need something. But do reach out! Community partnerships will strengthen your work and improve your program.
- 4. How can you work in partnership with trusted community partners to continue to create a more inclusive environment for the kids, teens and families your program hopes to reach?** Take a three-pronged approach and consider the following: 1) How might you continue to identify barriers that restrict program access that families, teens, and younger children may face; 2) How might you work collectively to minimize those barriers; and 3) How might you work in tandem to implement possible improvements? **Note:** *If you are asking someone to do work with you or for you, especially if it requires the labor of a person of color to leverage their knowledge and experience, make sure you fairly compensate them for their work and acknowledge their commitments.*
- 5. How can you seek input from families you are not reaching to ensure that their needs are met by your program?** If you have never asked families to provide feedback, start with informal conversations. Families that come to your sites likely have a hunch about why some families choose to not participate. Just asking a few simple questions can be a great way to assess how you might improve your program. Looking for more formal feedback? Think about asking families to complete a short survey onsite or hosting a focus group. If possible, compensate families for their time and make sure conversations are in a language families feel comfortable speaking. If, with your current staff, you cannot hold a conversation or translate a document into the language most families in your community speak, consider bringing local caregivers onto your team as staff, volunteers, or board members. These strategies can also be used to solicit feedback around meal quality and the availability of culturally appropriate foods at your sites.
- 6. What else might families in your community need, besides food for kids? Are there additional community partners whom you can work with to fill these needs?** If after talking with families, you identify additional needs beyond food for kids, who can you partner with in your community to address these needs? If food for the whole family is a need, how can you work with your local food bank to promote its services or integrate them into yours? How can you work with your local SNAP outreach office to help get the word out about this federal benefits program? If families need housing, healthcare, or employment assistance, who in your community might be able to help and how might you make them part of the conversation? Can you co-locate these services with your meal service for easier access?
- 7. How will you hold yourselves accountable to this work over time?** Good intentions do not ensure positive outcomes. Actively seek feedback from the kids, teens, and families you hope to serve by asking the questions above throughout the year. Through continued and open communication with your community, you'll be better able to assess the success of your efforts, identify opportunities for further improvement and iteration, and advance program equity.



Source: Trends in US Food Security. USDA Economic Research Service. 2016.  
Graph taken from: [Hunger is a Racial Equity Issue. Alliance to End Hunger. 2017.](#)