



HOW RURAL COMMUNITIES OVERCAME CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

No Kid Hungry partnered with Save the Children to conduct four, 1.5 hour long focus groups with sixteen No Kid Hungry grantees that self-identified as serving exclusively rural communities. Grantees represented both school districts and community based organizations. The research included in this report was made possible through funding by the Walmart Foundation. The findings, conclusions and recommendations presented in this report are those of the grantee alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Walmart Foundation.

Key Takeaways

Grantees overcame many challenges ranging from food shortages, to staffing burnout, language barriers, and limited transportation access. Through their creative problem solving, three trends emerged.

- 1. Partnerships are key.** Partners provided resources, expanded capacity, and spread the word to make meal providers as successful as possible. Most grantees interviewed planned to deepen existing partnerships, especially with their volunteers.
- 2. The need is great.** Grantees saw the need for meals grow during the COVID-19 pandemic and expect it to continue as the effects of the pandemic are felt for years to come. Continuation and expansion of summer meals programs are a high priority for rural communities.
- 3. Flexibility is necessary.** All grantees expressed they would like at least some of the waivers to stay in place, especially the area eligibility waiver, in order to break down the barriers that lead to food insecurity.

The program flexibilities and community partnerships formed through the COVID-19 pandemic are crucial to ending childhood hunger in rural America. Grantees expressed the need to build on these key lessons learned to meet the needs in their community.

Read on for more details and lessons learned around program outreach, transportation, food safety and supply chains.

Challenges & Solutions

Grantees shared the creative solutions they found to common challenges faced while providing meals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outreach

Working off their communities' strengths, rural grantees found creative communication strategies that overcame language and communication barriers. Access to reliable and affordable cellular phone service, broadband internet, and even utilities such as electricity and landline phones were stated as common limiting factors for rural community outreach. An example shared depicted families running out of minutes on their pre-paid cell phone so they could not be contacted via call or text.

These communication barriers proved especially hard in multi-lingual communities where a family's first language isn't spoken by staff or included in outreach materials.

Outreach Solutions

Meal providers found alternative communication methods to increase public awareness of free meal programs.

- Partner with radio stations, local news, or government entities to do weekly broadcasts that include meal service information.
- Post billboard announcements around the community.
- Include future meal distribution information in food boxes at distribution sites.



Transportation

Community partnerships with businesses, other non-profits, schools, and faith-based organizations proved crucial to overcoming transportation barriers. The lack of adequate public transportation, sidewalks, and safely walkable locations created limited access to meal sites. Families without personal transportation or financial resources for gas are unable to access meal sites on their own.

Even when providers offer home delivery of meals, ineffectual or out-of-date participant data can impact meal service when providers don't know where students are living, changes to family situations, and student eligibility for free or reduced-price meals.

Transportation Solutions

Partnerships with individuals and organizations helped bridge this barrier and connect multiple community resources.

- Distribute food from community locations, such as faith-based organizations or the local post office so families can get food in locations they frequent. Combine meal distributions with other programming to drive participation.
- Recruit volunteers to deliver meals to homes.

Food Safety

Infrastructure issues impact not only a family's ability to get meals, but to store food safely. Rural families may have limited storage space or lack utilities such as electricity making it difficult to store large portions of food at home.

Because school nutrition departments operate on such thin margins, there is little room for unexpected issues, especially those compounded by with the COVID-19 pandemic. One grantee shared that, on top of the challenges that came hand-in-hand with the pandemic, they also experienced two storms and a hurricane where they lost power for multiple days. These additional challenges led them to have to throw away most of their food, which then led to a shortage of food to distribute until the next delivery came.

Food Safety Solutions

Meal providers had to strategize what foods would keep best once taken by participants and recognizing that some kids were home alone and making their own meals. Families with working parents may be able to pick-up meals regularly, but often the children reheat or prepare meals for themselves during the day. Meals needed to be kid-friendly and easy to make and eat. All providers had to rethink how they served meals since everything had to be pre-packaged. This created a need for increased funds to purchase materials to package the food and/or purchase pre-packaged foods. Some grantees utilized No Kid Hungry grant funds to cover this extra cost.

Supply Chain

Many meal providers faced staffing and supply shortages along with difficulties to comply with COVID-19 protocols, such as social distancing when preparing/packaging food due to space limitations.

Supply chain issues during COVID-19 also led to fewer and fewer backup food items being available. Grantees shared that some items they purchased were unavailable and, therefore, substituted with something else. Unfortunately, these substitutes were often not kid-friendly and could make it more difficult to serve something fresh that is also transportable.

Because of supply chain issues, some grantees did feel that the meal quality of the food they served was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They cited a lack of variety and damaged food goods as the main issues.

Supply Chain Solutions

Strong partnerships with volunteers, restaurants, farmers, and food banks were used to overcome supply chain issues.

- Restaurants increased the capacity of food nutrition staff by preparing meals and aiding in distribution. At the same time, this helped restaurants garner brand awareness.
- Providers ordered from local farmers to maintain variety and overcome supply chain issues and stimulate the local economy.
- Food banks fed the whole family with groceries, snacks, and adult meals at shared distribution sites.
- Volunteers grocery shopped for meal providers and packed food boxes.
- Partnerships with community centers or businesses such as Rent-A-Center allowed for the use of their large refrigerators.

