



center for BEST
PRACTICES

Colorado No Kid Hungry Summer Meals Evaluation

Colorado No Kid Hungry is a partnership between Hunger Free Colorado, Share Our Strength, and the Office of Governor John Hickenlooper. Through a statewide, public-private coalition, the Campaign is working to ensure that all children have nutritious food at home, at school, and in their communities. Increasing participation in summer meals is an integral part of Colorado No Kid Hungry. Children are especially vulnerable in the summer months, when they can no longer depend on free and reduced price school breakfast and lunch for two nutritious meals every school day.

In Summer 2012, Share Our Strength hired Mission Spark to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of Colorado No Kid Hungry Campaign's summer meals expansion program efforts. The aim of the evaluation was to determine what strategies and tactics are most effective to increase participation in the summer meals program as well as what processes and management systems lead to the best outcomes. The following is a summary of the evaluation findings from Mission Spark.

BACKGROUND

In Summer 2012, Share Our Strength hired Mission Spark to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of Colorado No Kid Hungry Campaign's summer meals expansion program efforts. The aim of the evaluation was to determine what strategies and tactics are most effective to increase participation in the summer meals program as well as what processes and management systems lead to the best outcomes. Below is a summary of the evaluation findings from Mission Spark.

RESEARCH METHODS

The following process was developed and implemented to gather reliable and valid data on Colorado's summer food expansion efforts:

1. Developing a guiding logic model, a widely accepted government and nonprofit social program research and planning practice, that details potential causal links between invested resources/Program actions and Program outcomes. Developing such a model provides clarity on methods for evaluating programming interventions and measuring their impacts on desired results;
2. Participating in shared communications with other state evaluators to achieve greater coordination and synergy between efforts, troubleshoot and ensure usability and comparative ability of results;
3. Engaging a variety of stakeholders, including sponsor and site leadership, community and program partners, parents, staff and outreach consultants for their perspectives and insights; and
4. Employing the following data collection and evaluation methods: stakeholder interviews, surveys, focus groups, output tracking, secondary data sources, site visits and web analytics.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2012, the Summer Food Program served 1,304,260 meals and snacks—an increase of 11.52% over 2011. This growth rate represents somewhat of a plateau in gains from previous years and speaks to some of the growing pains being experienced by sponsor, site and partner staff as meals served increases, but staff capacity remains the same.

	SFSP Meals Served to Children	Non-SFSP Meals Served to Adults	Total	Growth Rate¹
2009	767892	0	767892	
2010	970854	33120	1003974	26.43%
2011	1169534	62314	1231848	20.46%
2012	1304260	33686	1337946	11.52%

PROGRAM UTILIZATION

Colorado's Summer Food program continues to grow in terms of meals served, but data this year suggest gains may be slowing. This plateau in growth was supported by feedback from sponsors, partners and sites that have rapidly increased capacity over the past years, with little to no staff increase. Sponsors reported wanting an increased planning period leading up to summer to accommodate growth, and identified funding as a key barrier to adding additional staff and increasing internal capacity. Outreach strategies that were most effective to increase awareness and program utilization by area children included information sent home in children's backpacks at the end of the school year, customized information on flyers and handouts regarding locations of service sites, and promotion of the program through trusted community partners. Keys to success for maintaining and increasing program utilization include: (1) Identifying and encouraging localized outreach strategies—the best strategies reported were consistently embedded in and tailored to specific communities; (2) Increasing access to programming and activities at sites to drive participation in Summer Meals; (3) Increasing financial literacy of sponsors and sites to help move past “break-even” financial models of sites and sponsors—particularly community sites, as these financial models are inhibiting program utilization.

SITE AND SPONSOR EXPANSION

Setting new sites up for success and retaining/ strengthening existing ones is critical for the ongoing capacity of the program. Community sites in particular need assistance in orchestrating successful outreach strategies and developing sustainable business models. 2012's strategic focus on increasing the number of sites and sponsors resulted in successfully increasing the number of new sites from 392 to 431, and from 70 to 74 sponsors. However, retention of sites recruited in previous years hampered expansion efforts (30 sites, of which 26 were community-based sites, were not retained). The addition of several mobile sites in 2012 provided successful examples of reaching more children in high need neighborhoods.

Keys to success for sponsor and site expansion going forward include: (1) helping existing community sponsors and sites gain capacity to meet existing need; (2) expanding the implementation of mobile sites; (3) improving communication, coordination and mentoring between existing sites, sponsors, and partners; and (4) achieving an intentional, strategic balance between retention and expansion—optimizing existing sites and getting new ones off the ground.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings suggest SFSP is experiencing a plateau growth rate in children and meals served, and sites and sponsors added. While 2010 and 2011 saw growth rates of over 20% in number of SFSP meals served to children compared to the previous year, 2012 showed a 11.52% growth rate.

Several main themes emerged based on data collected contributing to this diminishing rate of growth, specifically in the 7 focal area counties:

Onsite supplemental programming is a major driver in Summer Food Program participation.

- Findings support national parent focus group insights that parents perceive one of the main values of SFSP to be the ability for kids to participate in activities in a safe environment.
- SOS grants that supported programming investments for Sponsors in Colorado resulted in an overall increase in meals served;
- Given the comparatively high cost of adding programming to sites where programming does not already exist, focusing on developing low cost volunteer-based programs for community sites as well as actively seeking out additional potential sites where programming already exists and is supported, could be effective strategies for increasing supplemental programming as a driver of kids and meals served.

Successful outreach strategies for the future are local and tailored.

- Community-by-community outreach and engagement strategies are the most effective in encouraging local participations, including flyers sent home from local schools, materials which indicate closest sites, outreach partnerships with trusted community organizations, programs and leaders.
- Tailoring efforts is more time and resource intensive—time to invest in lasting community relationships and infrastructure, and hiring local community members as outreach consultants.

Less low hanging fruit in expanding the impact of the program.

- Huge gains in awareness and outreach, partner collaboration and sponsor and site expansion leading to early growth have been maintained, but additional gains are incremental and more costly.
- Federal and local policy and program restrictions are actively inhibiting growth (one mile rule, taking food offsite, approval deadlines) but are not easily changed.

The Colorado Summer Food Program, as a whole, is experiencing growing pains.

- Large sponsors reported staffing strains that have come from rapidly adding sites but not additional administrative staff to address the added reporting and support roles to accommodate these sites.
- Sponsors and Sites reported needing additional planning time to get approved, and up and running.
- New community sites reported experiencing a steep learning curve and needing additional support and training to succeed (this finding is also supported by the number of community sites (26) not retained from 2011).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE INVESTMENT

Hunger Free Colorado and Share Our Strength have almost doubled the meals served through the Summer Food Program in Colorado over four years. This section focuses on a three-year strategy to continue to grow and strengthen SFSP in Colorado through targeted means, focusing on:

- Developing and applying screening criteria for expansion of sites—those screening criteria would likely include level of need in the neighborhood, the potential of the site to be successful with a sustainable business model, a site with existing programming or the potential to add and sustain programming, a site that is trusted in the neighborhood and has existing connections to the children needing access to the program.
- Supporting the infrastructure to add programming to community sites, as possible—through youth employment, volunteers, corporate partners, etc.
- Focusing on retention of sites-- Additional focus given to underperforming sites (particularly community sites) that may need additional coaching to be successful.
- Supporting the needs of sponsors-- working with existing sponsors to better understand and help address their constraints in adding sites and supporting the ones they already have in feeding more kids.
- Actively pursuing the expansion of mobile sites with sustainable business models, access to insurance and support from the public health office.
- Limiting general marketing efforts—reduce or eliminate general materials and billboards, and consider low cost ways to support localized materials, potentially cobranded with trusted community organizations and containing site information relevant to the community. In addition to website, consider adding a mobile app which allows families to find their nearest site based on their current location.
- Focusing on embedding ownership of the SFSP program locally by building targeted capacity and partnerships in your highest need communities.
- Clarifying and documenting the specific roles and procedures of partners in supporting and administering SFSP to avoid confusion by sponsors, sites and families utilizing the program. This may also require minimizing the role of partner brands to focus on a unified message and set of resources.
- Continuing to encourage collaboration and planning efforts among state-wide leaders, partners, sponsors and sites, much like what was achieved through the sponsor roundtable and through the NKH Colorado Steering Committee efforts.

CONCLUSION

Colorado No Kid Hungry partners Share our Strength and Hunger Free Colorado, along with area partners have made monumental strides in expanding use of and access to the Summer Food Program for Colorado's children. Low hanging fruit for rapid gains in those expansion efforts is limited going forward. Increasing focus and targeted strategy is needed to make advances going forward. Deepening the capacity and sustainability of existing infrastructure—especially in supporting community sites, growing new sites strategically, increasing programming at summer meal sites, developing localized outreach strategies for and community ownership over program implementation, and increasing coordination, communication and planning among partners are all key to the long term success, viability and growth of the program.