



CASE STUDY: FREE SUMMER MEALS AT HOSPITALS ARKANSAS CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Sponsor in Focus

As the state's only health system dedicated to children's care and well-being, Arkansas Children's Hospital has an unyielding commitment to do what is best for the 710,000 kids living in the state. Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH) in downtown Little Rock is the larger of the system's two campuses, spanning 36 city blocks. With a staff of 505 physicians, the hospital offers 336 beds and three intensive care units. Thousands of children pass through its doors each month.

As one of the first hospitals in the country to offer free meals to children through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), ACH currently operates a year-round meals program using a sack lunch model, reimbursable through the SFSP and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). This case study will focus exclusively on the summer meals program at ACH.

For the summer meals program, sack lunches are prepared by volunteers at a food preparation facility on the hospital campus. Meals are prepared daily, delivered and stored in a cooler at the Riverbend Café near the hospital lobby, where children can receive a meal from a food service staff member on weekdays from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM. According to guidance from the USDA, the hospital campus is considered comparable to a school campus and therefore satisfies the SFSP congregate meal requirement. Children have the option to take the meals with them to waiting rooms, the playground or other onsite locations for consumption.

Key Stakeholders

The motivation to provide summer meals arose from an ACH-led community workgroup focused on food insecurity and basic needs, through which the hospital began exploring options to directly provide food assistance to children through the SFSP. At the time, the hospital's chief operations officer served on the Food Insecurity Committee, which was essential to getting executive leadership onboard. Additionally, Dr. Pat Casey (retired), a physician at ACH and chair of the Food Insecurity Workgroup at the time, was an early champion of the program and spearheaded the effort to begin operations in 2013. This multi-level support was essential in generating momentum for the program and mobilizing other stakeholders, including the Arkansas No Kid Hungry campaign and the Arkansas Department of Human Services. These key actors, with support from the regional office of the United

States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, helped ACH bring the summer meals program from idea to reality.

“More than once, our staff has reached out to hug moms who are brought to tears when they learn their children will be able to have lunch or dinner – and not be forced to skip another meal – because of this important program.”

- Dr. Patrick Casey, MD, Professor
of Developmental Pediatrics

Today, representatives from across the hospital are involved in program planning and implementation. The food service director is instrumental in managing menu plans and food service operations. Programming is also supported by the accounting and marketing departments as well as healthcare staff (doctors and nurses) who promote summer meals throughout the hospital. ACH also has a volunteer engagement department responsible for coordinating volunteers who express interest in working with the program.

Outcomes and Next Steps

The program has grown significantly since its inception in 2013, when 1,728 meals were served to a daily average of 33 children. The summer meals program served nearly 5,700 meals in 2016 and more than 7,000 meals in both 2017 and 2018. In 2018, ACH served an average of 128 children per week. In 2019, ACH hopes to continue their normal meal service operations, expand participation, and support other healthcare facilities in starting summer meals programs. Given the USDA's nationwide rescission of the waiver on mealtime restrictions ([SP 10-2017, SFSP 06-2017](#)), which now limits lunch service to two hours and requires four hours to elapse between lunch and supper service, ACH applied for a waiver to continue to operate the program on the same schedule as years past. Additionally, increasing advertising efforts throughout the hospital and continuing the conversation about food insecurity in the community are important next steps in the hospital's goal to move towards a national endorsement and adoption of this model of summer meals at healthcare facilities.

ACH now views summer meals as one component of a broader effort to address food insecurity. Efforts to expand access to summer meals at healthcare facilities are part of a broader community health initiative focused on the systemic and social determinants of health. Additionally, moving from process measures to outcome measures represents a shift in the program's focus. Staff are now thinking about how the hospital can help move the needle on food insecurity in the community beyond providing a meal. They are engaging in a national conversation about the important work that healthcare institutions across the country can do to offer free meals to hungry children, through summer meals programs and others. As one of the first hospitals to offer free summer meals in the country, ACH is uniquely positioned to lead the conversation based on their experience. A future goal is to convene a national meeting of hospitals that operate summer meals programs. This meeting would bring together various stakeholders and program coordinators to address the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by hospitals that operate as SFSP sites and sponsors.