



## CASE STUDY: FREE SUMMER MEALS AT HOSPITALS ATRIUM HEALTH UNIVERSITY CITY

### Sponsor in Focus

Atrium Health University City is a 130-bed acute care facility located in Charlotte, North Carolina. In 2017, the institution conducted a four-week pilot of their “Kids Eat Free” program as a Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) site. Meals were served in the hospital cafeteria from the regular cafeteria menu, allowing the hospital to operate as a self-prepare site.

University City wanted to leverage existing resources and build on the success of their on-site garden, in operation since 2012 through efforts from the Clinical Nutrition Manager. The garden is a key element of the institution’s emphasis on community health, providing fresh produce to a local food pantry and serving as an outdoor classroom. In partnership with Camino Community Center, a non-profit focused on the needs of the local community in Charlotte, University City operated a summer nutrition camp that features the garden as a tool for learning. As the program developed, program staff wanted to serve lunch to children participating in this program.

Consequently, University City became an open summer meals site serving federally reimbursable meals to camp participants and the public, with 154 meals served in August. The site used an offer-versus-serve (OVS) model, providing children the option to decline certain items. Both breakfast and lunch were available, but most meals were served during lunchtime. To meet the nutritional requirements of the federally-funded SFSP, children participating in the program were allowed to make selections from specified options in the hot food line, allowing these meals to be incorporated into existing food service. Posters were placed throughout the cafeteria detailing the weekly menu, and other promotional materials were displayed throughout the hospital and emergency room to provide information about the program.

### Key Stakeholders

In order to provide free meals to children as soon as possible, the best option for service during summer 2017 was for University City to join an existing SFSP program sponsor — Freedom Within Walls — as a summer meals site. A driving force in pushing for community health initiatives, the hospital’s onsite Clinical Nutrition Manager was an early champion for the program and the hospital’s involvement as an SFSP site. In addition, the food service

director had prior experience working with the SFSP at a hospital in South Carolina, which was instrumental in getting executive leadership on board with the program.

“Hunger pains are real and far too numerous. We all have the ability, opportunity and obligation to end hunger by making food available to our youth. With the Kids Eat Free program, we are eliminating hunger one meal and one child at a time.”

- Elaine Jones RDN, LDN, Clinical  
Nutrition Manager, Atrium Health  
University City

### **Outcomes and Next Steps**

The pilot was implemented to test if a free summer meal service for children could be a sustainable program for University City. Hospital administrators had two main concerns: 1) the program could not impede the typical cafeteria flow or slow down hospital and nursing staff being served during lunchtime, and 2) the program needed to be cost neutral. University City implemented a number of measures in its program design to address the first stipulation, including a separate checkout line for participating children, a refrigerator dedicated to milk storage at the end of the hot food line and posters listing meal options to help children make selections in advance. Volunteers were also present in the cafeteria during lunch service to guide children to the correct food station and cash register, where the appropriate program data were recorded. The food service director worked with hospital budget staff to make sure that meal costs were minimized while still providing nutritious meals within the scope of the hospital's existing food service model.

In summer 2018, University City expanded the summer meals program as a sponsoring organization. The hospital received reimbursements directly from the state rather than passing through a third party. This allowed University City to tap into the full per-meal reimbursement covering both program and administrative costs. The increased reimbursement allowed the program to expand while ensuring that it remains cost-neutral, consistent with a key priority of hospital administration.

The primary goal for summer 2018 was to increase participation at University City, with an emphasis on the number of children receiving breakfast. Over the course of the 11-week program, University City achieved their goal, serving a total of 3,438 meals!

To achieve this increase in participation, advertising was key. Program staff increased their off-site advertising, in coordination with the hospital's marketing and community health departments, to distribute information about the program throughout the community in Charlotte. Information was shared through University City Family Zone, schools, community centers (ex. YMCA) and other local organizations, including Camino Community Center. University City also worked with the public library to develop on-site literacy programs during lunchtime that served

as coordinated activities for children. Additionally, the Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department visited the program regularly to mentor and work on the development of elder respect and social connectedness. Another priority was to increase evaluation efforts, including post point-of-service anonymous surveys to generate and incorporate user feedback into the program.

During the 2017 pilot, program coordinators recognized the need for volunteers to run the program effectively. In 2018, University City had interns from UNC-Charlotte's CARS program (Community Action Research Scholars) to assist with day-to-day operations, such as streamlining meal service by guiding children through the line and engaging with families. Interns were identified through relationships with UNC-Charlotte professors, and they received a stipend through a university grant program while volunteering and assisting with community-based participatory research (CBPR) that included a special emphasis on the social determinants of health.

The summer meals program has generated a vast amount of positive feedback from hospital staff, clients and the community. Program coordinators are passionate about reaching underserved families in Charlotte and improving health outcomes through increased access to nutritious meals. In addition to its positive impact on children in the area, the program has empowered hospital staff to serve their community.