



CASE STUDY: FREE SUMMER MEALS AT HOSPITALS CAROLINAS HEALTHCARE SYSTEM UNIVERSITY (ATRIUM HEALTH)

Sponsor in Focus

Carolinas HealthCare System University (CHS University), part of Atrium Health, 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.

CHS University 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, CHS University 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, CHS University 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 CHS University 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 at CHS-University, part of Atrium Health, we are eliminating hunger one meal and one child at a time.”

- Elaine Jones RDN, LDN, Clinical
Nutrition Manager, CHS University

Outcomes and Next Steps

The pilot was implemented to test if a free summer meal service for children could be a sustainable program for CHS University. 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. CHS University 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, CHS University will expand the summer meals program as a sponsoring organization. The hospital will receive reimbursements directly from the state rather than passing through a third party. This allows CHS University to tap into the full per-meal reimbursement covering both program and administrative costs. The increased reimbursement will allow the program to expand while ensuring it remains cost-neutral, consistent with a key priority of hospital administration.

The primary goal for summer 2018 is to increase participation at CHS University, with an emphasis on the number of children receiving breakfast. Program staff plan to increase 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 will be available at schools, community centers (ex. YMCA) and other local organizations, including Camino Community Center. CHS University is working with the public library to develop on-site literacy programs during lunchtime that will serve as coordinated activities for children. Another priority is to increase evaluation efforts, including post point-of-service questions for clients who visit an information table set up in the hospital cafeteria. Families can choose to participate in an optional, anonymous survey, which CHS

University received approval from the state agency to conduct. Data collected will be essential to demonstrating demand for the program and making a case for future expansion and funding.

Although the original meal site location remains the focus in 2018, CHS University intends to expand the program in the future. During the pilot, program coordinators recognized the need for volunteers to run the program effectively. In 2018, CHS University will have 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 who visit the site. Interns were identified through relationships with UNC-Charlotte professors, receive a stipend through a university grant program while volunteering and assist with community-based participatory research (CBPR) that includes a special emphasis on the social determinants of health. CHS University plans to create a toolkit for other hospitals who wish to participate as SFSP sites and hopes to eventually operate the program at other facilities within their network.

A major takeaway from the 2017 pilot is the 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. The overall positive response to the pilot program has allowed CHS University to plan for expansion with enthusiasm and buy-in from relevant stakeholders and set them up for success in 2018.