



# INNOVATION BRIEF

## Grab and Go Weekend Meals at Summer Meal Sites

The national summer meals program is a lifeline for children in need, but most summer sites are only open Monday to Friday. For children that depend on this program, this means that Saturdays and Sundays can be the toughest days of the week. Feeding Tampa Bay (FTB), a food bank located on the Gulf Coast of Florida, theorized that for the kids they serve, weekends could be a challenge.

Driven forward by the Community Programs Manager, Clarissa Rain, FTB sought to test the assumption that providing families with frozen, prepared meals to eat on the weekends would decrease the prevalence of weekend hunger. In summer 2019, they designed a pilot to put their idea into action. The pilot ran from June 3 to August 9, 2019, with meals given out at one, open summer meal site, every Friday. Secondary assumptions the team hoped to test were:

- Serving weekend meals would improve user experience and increase participation in their summer meals program.
- Families would experience lower levels of stress tied to weekend hunger because they were receiving meals.
- Families would have more funds to purchase other necessities because they were spending less on food.

## IMPLEMENTATION



To make the work a reality, the pilot team leaned on an important internal stakeholder: Chef Ben. Chef Ben oversees a nonprofit restaurant that FTB had recently acquired. The restaurant serves free meals at two locations to anyone in need. Under the FTB umbrella, the restaurant took on a new responsibility, producing all summer meals served at FTB sites. Before details of the pilot were confirmed, the team had a conversation with Chef Ben to ensure that he had the capacity and experience required to create prepared, frozen meals that children could consume on the weekend. Chef Ben was confident that his team would be able to handle the additional work and assured the pilot team that he could be flexible with orders in the event participation varied.

Once the team knew that they had the internal capacity to make the pilot happen, they introduced the idea to a site they had provided meals for the summer before.

Before the pilot started, FTB alerted the state agency of their plans to pilot frozen, prepared weekend meals. Because meals eaten off-site are not reimbursable under current law, the state did not require any administrative changes for the site to be in compliance. They viewed weekend meals as a separate program that just so happened to be at the same location as the summer meal site.



While FTB had worked with the pilot site the summer before, going into summer 2019 they had the opportunity to make additional improvements to the program. The most important was a change related to meal quality. FTB had heard from families that there was room to improve the food provided, so when they acquired the nonprofit restaurant, they were quick to drop their previous vendor. This gave the FTB team more influence in what was served and flexibility when it came to menu planning. While this improvement was a big win for kids served, it created an additional variable the team had to consider in the pilot.

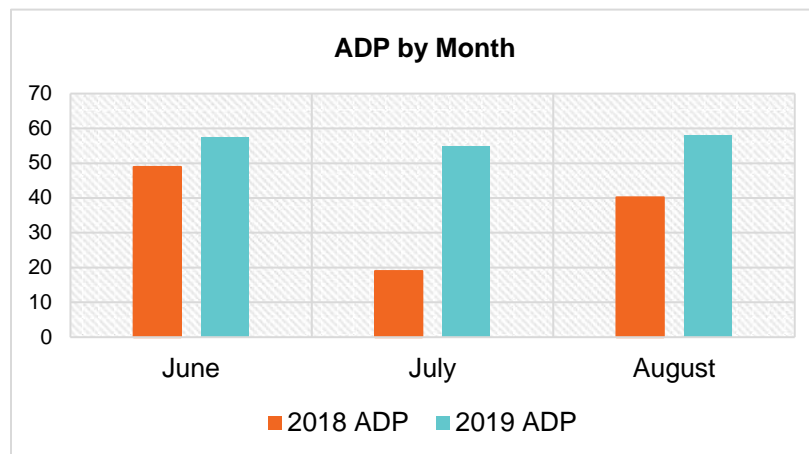
When FTB developed their idea, they knew it was important that the pilot site be open to all kids in the community. Under the summer meals program, some sites are considered open, which means that all kids can eat a meal there, regardless of financial status. This was important because to study if weekend meals had an effect on participation, all kids had to be welcome. While the site FTB worked with was considered open by the state, it felt somewhat closed. Located inside a school, families unfamiliar with the school or program may not have felt comfortable going inside for a meal.

**This idea was piloted in partnership with No Kid Hungry through The Test Kitchen, a concept accelerator designed to help nonprofits, schools, faith organizations, and local governments turn their best ideas into validated strategies and promising practices. To learn more about this pilot or how you can test your own idea, reach out to [innovation@strength.org](mailto:innovation@strength.org)**

## RESULTS

FTB successfully implemented the pilot in summer 2019. By the end of summer 2019, they served 2,414 frozen, weekend meals. Data from the pilot shows that weekend meals may improve access to food on the weekend and may be related to lower levels of stress and the ability for caregivers to spend money on other needs. The data, however, does not illustrate a clear link between weekend meals and increased participation in summer meals. To evaluate the pilot, the team utilized meal count data, conducted interviews with teens in the program and caregivers of younger children who were also in the program, and Photovoice, which is a qualitative method where kids and their caregivers take photos to document their answers to specific research questions.

Meal count data from summer 2018 and 2019 does indicate that there was a clear increase in average daily participation (ADP) from summer 2018 to 2019. Despite this, there was agreement across the pilot team that this data alone did not prove a positive relationship between weekend meals and summer meals participation.



Because the team made multiple changes at the site level, they felt there were too many other variables that may have caused the increase. Additionally, in interviews, most families that were new to the program did not indicate that weekend meals were a primary motivator for program attendance.

Based on interviews with children and their caregivers, and the photos they captured, it seems that the pilot did increase access to food on the weekends. Most individuals interviewed indicated that the meals were helpful.

Families spoke positively about the convenience that frozen, prepared meals provided. One caregiver noted, “Yes [the meals are helpful because] this food doesn’t go bad so I just throw it in the freezer and whenever I need it or am in a rush I can grab it and warm it up without any problems.” Another explained that because the meals are frozen and easy to prepare, her children are able to warm them up and eat them when she’s not there, which alleviates her worry about what they might eat.

A number spoke about the time they saved by not having to cook, with one caregiver explaining, "...I get to spend more time with my little girl instead of having to worry about food." And some described that the meals helped them care for other family members who live with them. One caregiver explained, "We have grandparents at home and they are able to eat those foods if no one else is home to cook because all they have to do is heat it up."



Participants generally seemed to think that the meals served tasted good and were healthy, although at least one noted that the meals did not seem to be geared toward young children who might not eat "salad and vegetables." Others positively described them as being "well- balanced," "low in salt," and containing "plenty of vegetables." Through pictures that they submitted, they also contrasted these meals to the fast food that they may otherwise eat.



In addition to the convenience of the meals, families described how the meals provided a bit more financial flexibility for their families. One caregiver stated that she has "been able to buy my little girl clothes with the money left over." The photos families shared of what they were able to purchase because they spent less on food further supported this response. Families shared photos of school clothes, school supplies, bills they were able to pay, lights on in their homes, and gas gauges in their cars.

## DISCUSSION

FTB's pilot shows that providing families with frozen, prepared meals to eat on the weekends may alleviate some of the cost and stress associated with preparing three meals a day. Most families were appreciative of the program and expressed clear benefits from participation. While results were mostly positive, outcomes may vary with program changes. For example, if a sponsor were to serve produce or nonperishable items instead of frozen, prepared meals, families may respond differently.

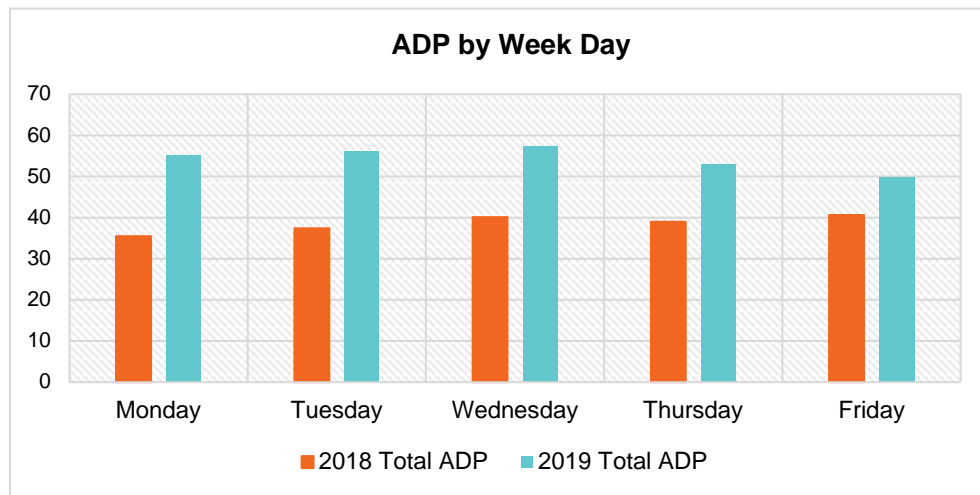
When sponsors have access to donated food or kitchen space, the pilot also illustrated that it is relatively easy to provide families with weekend food at an established summer meal site. A model like this one may work best for sponsors that are also food banks because meals eaten away from the site are not reimbursable under federal law. This means that like FTB, sponsors have to have a way to cover the cost of food to make the pilot work. Food banks, especially those that prepare their own summer meals, may be uniquely equipped to take on pilots like this because weekend meals can be made at cost, without additional labor from an outside vendor.

While the pilot did not provide evidence of a clear link between weekend meals and increased program participation, this assumption may warrant further exploration. If there were fewer confounding variables and the site felt more open, it may be possible to draw a clearer conclusion.

## TIPS AND TRICKS

Here are some easy tips and tricks to consider before adding a weekend meal component to an established summer meals program:

1. Think about what resources you already have that may help you provide weekend meals without added costs. Do you have donated produce? What about an existing relationship with a vendor? Don't be afraid to get creative.
2. Meal count data showed that despite serving weekend meals one day a week, sponsors should expect participation numbers to be consistent throughout the week. Before implementing their pilot, the FTB team worried that weekend meals would make participation less predictable. They theorized that some families may only come on the days weekend meals were provided, making it more difficult to accurately predict the number of meals needed.



3. No matter what type of weekend food you provide, consider nutrition standards and the preferences of the families you serve.
4. Know who your target recipient is and design for them. FTB received feedback that the meals provided were hard for young children to eat. Think about the age groups you work with most and then decide what you will provide based on this information.