

Emerging Strategies and Tactics for Meal Service During School Closures Related to the Coronavirus

This document was last updated on 4/30/2020 and will continue to be updated.

For background information on program options for serving meals during school closures related to the coronavirus, including guidance related to nationwide waivers, see this [FAQ](#).

Always communicate with and receive approval from your state agency prior to implementing non-congregate meal service or any new strategy in order to ensure compliance and reimbursement.

State agencies are likely to be very busy at this time. We encourage partners to offer to support their state agency, which will allow for a coordinated response and consistent messaging.

Sections of this Resource Guide

- [Staffing](#)
- [Staff Safety](#)
- [Planning for Emergencies](#)
- [Meal Options, Preparation, and Procurement](#)
- [Meal Distribution Models](#)
 - [Drive Thru or Curbside Pick-Up](#)
 - [Walk-Up Distribution](#)
 - [Mobile or School Bus Route Delivery](#)
 - [Direct Home Delivery](#)
- [Meal Distribution Logistics](#)
- [Record Keeping](#)
- [Communication](#)
- [Partnerships and Additional Services](#)
- [Summer and Future Planning](#)

Staffing

- Assess staff ability to work during school closures as well as their ability to work at different locations as needed.
 - Some staff may not be available if they are part of a high-risk group, or if they need to care for someone in a high-risk group (e.g. persons over age 60 and persons with pre-existing health conditions).
 - Allow staff who are not able to work on site to provide support remotely when feasible.
 - Tasks could include supporting outreach and communications, coordinating with partners, responding to inquiries, managing a meal pre-

order system, and for school staff, contacting families to arrange home deliveries.

- Explore emergency child care options in your area. Some YMCAs and other child care providers are able to provide care for the children of essential workers.
- Create employee carpools to ease transportation issues. Mass transit should still be available for essential workers but may be running less frequently.
- Develop a plan for communicating with staff during school closures.
 - Hold a nightly conference call for all staff working each day to address concerns and continue improving operations for the next day.
 - Check in regularly with all employees, including those who are not currently working on site and those designated as back-up staff.
- Where possible, find known and trusted staff members to support meal distribution.
 - For schools, this may include cafeteria workers who serve kids during the regular school year, bus drivers, principals, school secretaries, coaches, and when and where available, teachers or teachers' aides.
 - For community locations, this may include afterschool programming staff, librarians, faith leaders, or other trusted community members.
- Leverage additional support when needed.
 - Solicit help from other employees within your organization who may not otherwise have work, such as administrators, afterschool activity providers, or coaches.
 - Request volunteers to support tasks like counting or bagging packaged items, especially if these tasks can be done from a central kitchen or off-site location where the need for background checks may be mitigated.
 - If short-staffed for long periods of time during extended closures, look into hiring laid off restaurant or food service employees, whether as contractors, temporary employees, or permanent staff.
- Implement proactive measures to protect staff and ensure ongoing operations.
 - Ideally, avoid maxing out staff capacity from the start so that some employees are available if others must stop working.
 - If permitted to serve meals for multiple days at one time, consider consolidating meal preparation and distribution to one or two times per week in order to limit staff exposure.
 - If possible, spread out meal preparation across multiple kitchens or locations so that others are available if one location needs to be closed down.
- When possible, consider offering hazard pay or hazard pay to employees who continue working.
 - For organizations keeping all staff on payroll even if they are unable to work, consider offering employees who are working their usual hourly rate for hours worked on top of the pay they would have received if they were not working.

Staff Safety

- If your school, district, or organization has a nurse on staff, ask for support with health education for staff, or request that they proactively ask employees about symptoms on a regular basis.
- Ensure that staff understand the importance of not coming to work while sick or under self-quarantine due to possible exposure.
 - Remind staff that they may still transmit COVID-19 without or before developing symptoms, which can take up to 14 days from the time of exposure to the coronavirus that causes COVID-19.
- Encourage frequent handwashing for at least 20 seconds each time.
 - Allow staff to take needed time for handwashing before beginning work and after sneezing or touching their phone or face.
 - Refer to the [Centers for Disease Control](#) for guidance and resources.
- Provide gloves and urge staff to change them as needed, like after touching their face.
- In accordance with [Centers for Disease Control guidance](#), provide masks for staff, both those preparing meals and those distributing them.
 - Request support from community members who could sew reusable cloth masks.
 - Ask if maintenance staff have masks or other protective equipment they could share, or see if masks are on hand for craft or construction activities.
 - Provide staff with [guidelines](#) for removing and reusing masks.
- Regularly sanitize hard surfaces, especially high-touch surfaces like door knobs or refrigerator handles as well as surfaces in high-traffic areas.
- Allow staff to stay distanced during meal preparation to the greatest extent possible.
 - Space out work stations.
 - Move as many activities as possible, like bagging or assembly, out of cramped kitchens and into unused spaces like the cafeteria or gym.
 - Have one individual responsible for each task or workstation.
 - Limit how many people need to access shared spaces like storage areas or equipment like refrigerators.
 - Deliver needed items to each workstation rather than handing them off personally.
- Refer to LunchAssist.org's [COVID-19 page](#) for additional safety and distancing resources, including signs and infographics that you can post for staff.

Planning for Emergencies

- Identify staff who can serve as back-ups should an employee become unable to work or an entire team needs to be quarantined.

- Create a plan for covering operations or distribution at sites affected by closures, like sanitizing kitchens and pulling in back-up staff, or building up capacity at other kitchen locations and serving the site as a stop on a delivery route.
- Develop an emergency communication plan for notifying staff, the state agency, local public health officials, and the general public should a site need to close due to the detection of COVID-19 among the staff.
 - Share your communication plan with your organization's or district's leadership team, including the Superintendent and School Board.
 - Defer to the guidance of local public health officials, but most likely, anyone who worked with the affected staff member will need to self-quarantine and monitor for symptoms for 14 days.
 - Activate your emergency staffing plan.
 - In addition to contacting staff, determine whether any vendors or partners need to be alerted in order to redirect deliveries or change other operations.
 - If unable to cover the gap created by the site or kitchen closure, coordinate with other program operators or vendors who can serve those sites or families.
 - If needed, ask the state agency for support identifying alternative operators or vendors who could help to fill the gap.
 - Tell the state agency if and how your operations are changing to cover meal distribution for the affected site or sites served by the affected kitchen.
 - Share details about any changes in operations with your organization's or district's communications team in order to notify the public and make any necessary changes to site listings. Or, provide information about other meal distribution sites or resources.
 - Notify anyone who may have come to the affected site about the detection of COVID-19, the precautions taken, and if and how operations are changing to cover meal distribution.
 - For schools, this may include parent email, robocall, or text message systems along with the school and/or district's social media accounts and website.
 - For non-school sites, this may include signs posted at the meal distribution site along with the site and/or sponsor's social media accounts and website.

Meal Options, Preparation, and Procurement

- All health, safety, and sanitation requirements for meal preparation, holding, and serving continue to apply.
 - Refer to the Institute of Child Nutrition's [food safety resources](#).

- If possible, maintain on-site meal preparation or split meal preparation across multiple kitchens or locations rather than using a central kitchen. This way, if one location needs to be shut down, others can take over, and fewer staff would be affected.
- If current kitchens or vendors are unable to meet demands, consider other food service management companies that may have capacity due to school closures as well as private restaurants or caterers that may be able to support efforts.
 - The USDA said in [COVID-19: Child Nutrition Program Response #4](#) that non-competitive proposals are permitted during emergency situations.
 - Communicate with your state agency to confirm appropriate procurement procedures and documentation in this situation.
 - If you need help identifying alternative vendors, request support from No Kid Hungry or your state agency.
- At this time, all meal pattern requirements apply to each child nutrition program unless your request for a waiver is approved in advance.
 - Communicate with your state agency if you experience difficulty sourcing any meal components. State agencies have been directed to consider waiver requests when there are issues of supply and availability.
 - As required, continue to accommodate special dietary needs wherever possible, and provide clear information about allergens and meal specifications (kosher, halal, vegetarian, etc.).
- To support accurate forecasting or to accommodate special dietary needs, implement online ordering.
 - This can be done simply via free tools like Google Forms, or companies like NutriSlice may be able to support specialized ordering software.
 - Maintain access for families who may not be able to order online by preparing additional meals and making them available at certain locations or after online order pick-ups have occurred.
- Meal options include, and may be a mix of:
 - Hot meals
 - Cooked meals served cooled along with instructions for reheating
 - Consider whether there may be children experiencing homelessness or unstable housing who might not be able to reheat food. If so, either avoid this model or have alternate meals on hand if needed.
 - Cold meals
 - Shelf-stable meals
- Post or send home food safety instructions for storing meals or meal components.
- If your state agency has opted into the nationwide waiver of meal service time restrictions and allows sites to provide more than one meal or snack at the same time, serve a hot meal along with a cold or shelf-stable breakfast for the next day.

- Unless approved by your state agency, assume meals must be complete and unitized.
 - Providing groceries or meal ingredients would **not** count as reimbursable meals.
 - Providing bulk items or packaging similar items together with instructions for portioning them over the week may be acceptable.
 - For example, you may be able to provide a quart of milk (four 8 fluid ounce servings) alongside two breakfasts and two lunches, rather than four individual cartons.
 - Offer versus serve (OVS) is **not** permitted for any operator or site type.

Meal Distribution Models

Choose a model or mix of models that work for your sites, staff, and community, and implement appropriate safety measures based on that model. Consider offering no-contact direct home delivery for families that have tested positive for COVID-19, are experiencing symptoms, or need to self-quarantine. Or, refer those families to other resources.

- **Drive thru or curbside pick-up**
 - In this model, parents or families stay in their vehicles while receiving meals.
 - Establish a distribution point that allows for a line of waiting vehicles without backing up onto the street.
 - If possible, ask families to open their trunk from inside their vehicle and place the meal in the trunk rather than hand it directly to them.
 - Or, place meals on a table and then have families pull forward to collect the meal from the table rather than handing off the meal.
- **Walk-up distribution**
 - Put traffic cones, tape, or chalk marks at least six feet apart on the ground to show how far apart groups should wait.
 - Place meals on a table and have each family approach the table to collect them, or use a serving tray to pass meals to families.
 - Take meal counts at a distance.
 - If necessary to limit crowds:
 - Extend the amount of time for meal pick-up,
 - Set a second pick-up time later in the afternoon or evening,
 - Have a time designated for families to pick up online orders before the time promoted to the general public, or
 - Establish staggered meal service times or days, such as families with last names A-E on Monday, last names F-J on Tuesday, etc.
 - For staff comfort, set up a table just inside the door of a building and serve meals across the table through the open door instead of requiring staff to be outside.

- **Mobile or school bus route delivery**
 - This model may ease transportation barriers for families while minimizing the number of people at each pick-up point.
 - For schools, consider utilizing a known schedule for bus routes, such as a late start school day schedule.
 - For mobile routes, select accessible locations near where families live, like housing communities and apartment complexes.
 - Identify a parking lot or other area for children and families to safely space out while waiting.
 - Bring a table or cart where you can set out meals for families to collect, rather than handing meals directly to individuals.
- **Direct home delivery**
 - This is currently only an option for school food authorities or families who sign up for [Emergency Meals to You](#).
 - Home delivery requires written consent from the parent or family to be obtained by the school. Consent may be provided electronically.
 - Meals may be delivered to all children within an eligible area. If a school is not area-eligible, meals may be delivered to enrolled students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. All students attending CEP, Provision 2, or Provision 3 schools are eligible for delivered meals.
 - In order to work with another organization to provide delivery, the school must obtain written consent from the parent or family to share their contact information.
 - Schools working with a private vendor for delivery must have a signed memorandum of understanding regarding confidentiality of student data.
 - With approval and necessary waivers on time restrictions, meals for multiple days (up to one week) may be delivered at one time once the number of eligible children in the house has been verified and daily maximums are kept (i.e. no more than one breakfast and one lunch per child per day).
 - For more information, see the USDA's guidance at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/covid-19-meal-delivery>.

Meal Distribution Logistics

- Regardless of model, consider the equipment or supplies needed.
 - If staff will be outside in all weather for drive thru, curbside, or walk-up models:
 - Set up a pop-up tent to cover staff and meals themselves.
 - Provide ponchos for rainy days.
 - Ensure that staff will be able to access restrooms.
 - Portable outdoor hand sinks may be required.

- Repurpose carts or kiosks to get meals from the kitchen to the distribution point and hold meals until distribution.
- Cooler bags or cambros can help maintain food temperature during long distribution or delivery windows.
 - If dealing with limited storage capacity, put only the items that need to be kept cold or hot in the cooler bags or cambros. Keep the rest at room temperature and then unitize as needed for service.
- Regularly sanitize tables or serving trays that families may touch while collecting meals.
- As needed, ask your school or organization's security staff to oversee meal distribution, manage traffic, and help ensure distancing.
- If permitted by your state agency, distribute meals for more than one day at one time to minimize exposure and ease transportation barriers families may face.
 - The USDA permits delivery of meals for up to one week at a time through SFSP or SSO (see [Q5](#)).
 - If this requires too much storage or staff capacity:
 - Establish different pick-up or delivery days for different groups, such as families with last names A-E on Monday, last names F-J on Tuesday, etc.
 - Have different pick-up or delivery days for different areas or locations served by the same central kitchen.
- Meet the needs of children with parents or guardians who are essential workers and unable to come during narrow timeframes for pick-up.
 - Offer extended pick-up times rather than just an hour or two around midday.
 - Establish a second pick-up time in the evening.
- Have a time designated for families to pick up online orders before the time promoted to the general public.

Record Keeping

- Unless otherwise directed by your state agency, all usual record keeping requirements apply to each child nutrition program, including attendance for CACFP operators as well as menus and meal count records for all programs.
- Under most usual circumstances and for most SFSP or SSO sites types, it is **not** required to record names for attendance or meal counts.
 - Doing so *may* be necessary as part of your plan with your state agency for:
 - Distributing more than one meal at a time (e.g. a breakfast for the next day or lunches for several days at a time);
 - Distributing a meal to an adult without a child present; or
 - Serving meals at a site that does not qualify as area eligible.

- If names are collected, children must **not** be overtly identified as eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.
- If staff new to working on child nutrition programs, volunteers, or other community partners are assisting with meal distribution or delivery, ensure that they receive training on properly documenting meals served for claiming purposes.
- Schools' usual systems for recording meal counts, such as PIN number entry or swiping student IDs, may be helpful and allowable, particularly if the school is implementing multiple pick-up times.
 - If children or their parents are touching a PIN pad or other terminal, have a plan for sanitizing it between uses.
 - Have a back-up plan in case of technology failures.
 - Have a system for recording meals served to children who are not enrolled students, like younger siblings.

Communication

- Post clear and up-to-date information on the website for the sponsoring organization or school food authority as well as each meal distribution site, where available. Include information like:
 - How many meals will be distributed at once,
 - The menu,
 - Guidance on allergies and special dietary needs, and
 - Whether children need to be present, or if a child does not need to be present, what information or documentation is requested to verify that the adult is the parent or guardian of an eligible child.
- For schools, use text message or robocall services to reach parents.
- Use social media to promote the availability of meals and share updates.
- Provide information to the local news media to help promote the availability of meals and sources of information for details and updates.
- Post clear signage and information at sites to help children and families locate the exact place and procedures for meal pick-up.
 - Consider large banners or sandwich board signs to direct people to open sites.
 - As needed, post multiple signs with arrows directing vehicles and families to the right location, or use sidewalk chalk or tape for sites with walk-up distribution.
- Develop an emergency communication plan should a staff member develop symptoms or test positive for COVID-19. Refer to the [emergency communication plan information](#) in the [Planning for Emergencies section](#).

Partnerships and Additional Services

- At area-eligible locations, offer a supper and/or snack through CACFP At-Risk Afterschool in addition to breakfast and lunch through SFSP or SSO. Or, partner with another sponsor or school so that one organization provides breakfast and lunch through SFSP or SSO and the other provides a supper and snack through CACFP At-Risk Afterschool.
 - USDA guidelines allow multiple organizations to operate out of one location during emergencies.
- At area-eligible locations, provide weekend meals through CACFP At-Risk Afterschool, SFSP or SSO. Or, refer families to locations that are offering weekend meals.
- School buses can deliver assignments, books, and other supplies along with meals.
- Work with a food bank or pantry to distribute groceries or other household supplies to parents and families during the same time that meals are being distributed.
 - This may be particularly helpful as an alternative if adults request meals on behalf of their children without having the needed documentation or verification that they have an eligible child at home.
- Post or provide information about other resources or support services that may be available in your community, or provide the number for the National Hunger Hotline: 1-866-3 HUNGRY and 1-877-8 HAMBRE (1-866-348-6479 and 1-877-842-6273).
 - The hotline refers people in need of emergency food assistance to food pantries, government programs, and other organizations.

Summer and Future Planning

- Assess your finances and communicate proactively with the state agency if you need to reduce staffing or meal service operations or close underperforming sites.
- Communicate proactively with your organization's leadership and with the state agency regarding summer plans, including:
 - State application deadlines and training dates for SFSP or SSO
 - Whether your organization will hold in-person programs or activities like summer school or camps, or when a determination will be made
 - Staff and operational capacity to continue serving meals under a variety of scenarios, such as if the non-congregate waiver expires June 30 or gets extended.
- For school nutrition departments:
 - Run direct certification reports frequently in order to maximize identified student percentages for the Community Eligibility Provision for School Year 2020-2021.
 - Confirm CEP deadlines for School Year 2020-2021 with your state agency.