



INNOVATION CASE STUDY

When Homes and Yards Become Summer Meal Sites

Burlington, Colorado sits near Kansas's western border. Home to about 3,500 people, residents experience some of the joys and hardships of living in rural America. Originally settled as a railway hub, the town has a history rooted in trade, agriculture, and community. Today, many residents are employed seasonally by large farming operations. With the median household income just over \$33,000, life in Burlington can be difficult, but residents are often willing to help each other out.

BACKGROUND

Prairie Family Center, a dynamic nonprofit that provides social services in the community, embodies this supportive spirit. Deena Ziegler, the organization's executive director, explains, "We approach families through a strength-based approach... we try to capture what their strengths are and help to build up that family through what strengths they already have."

While Prairie Family Center supports families throughout the year, Ziegler revealed that the summer months are especially tough. During the school year, most kids in Burlington get free breakfast, lunch, and a snack at school. With school meals, families can make it on a smaller food budget, but when school lets out their expenses can increase. To minimize this burden, Prairie Family Center started serving free summer meals in conjunction with summer school through the Summer Food Service Program in 2013.



The program was a big help for some families, but Prairie Family Center knew that many families were unable to utilize the service. Meal service ran only for the month of July when summer school was in session, and for some families, gas prices made the distance from where they lived to the school a barrier. "Distance is a problem out here... we're kind of out in the middle of nowhere," confirmed Project Facilitator, Ronda Neidig.

A NEW APPROACH

In summer 2017, Prairie Family Center teamed up with Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry Campaign to try out a brand new approach. Knowing distance was a barrier, they set out to open new sites closer to where kids live and play. While community is important in Burlington, there are not many places like parks or picnic shelters for residents to convene. For the new sites to be truly accessible, Prairie Family Center had to get creative. In an attempt to overcome barriers and build on strengths, they turned to the community itself, asking residents to open up their homes and yards as summer meal sites. While it seemed like the approach might work, placing summer meal sites in homes and yards was a radical shift from serving meals in the school cafeteria.

Interested in trying an approach like this in your community? Reach out to your state agency to talk about how it might work and how you can ensure compliance with local and federal regulations. To learn more about this approach, email us at innovation@strength.org.

Unsure of what to expect, No Kid Hungry funded the pilot to ensure that if there were any issues with site locations and program compliance, Prairie Family Center's status as a summer meals sponsor would not be jeopardized. In less than a month, fifteen families offered up their homes or yards and agreed to manage and oversee meal service at the new site. That summer, the family volunteers served over 1,600 meals. When asked about the program, 94% expressed interest in future participation and 88% agreed that the new approach filled a need that otherwise would have gone unmet.

The next summer, Prairie Family Center decided to duplicate their work, but this time, they wanted to do so through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). They worked closely with their state agency, the Colorado Department of Education, and the local health inspector to make sure their work complied with local and federal regulations. In summer 2018, 20 families volunteered for the program. Collectively, they served 4,057 meals over a four-week period and reimbursement was provided through SFSP for all meals served.

Based on lessons learned and successes in 2017 and 2018, Prairie Family Center felt confident that their new approach worked better for some kids in their community. While an approach like this may not be best suited for all places, it works in Burlington. Ziegler explained, "It is not uncommon for families to live miles apart and some of those families that are struggling. This brings the food to their table at a time that is crucial because their kiddos are growing... They're not going to drive eight, ten miles for free breakfast and lunch. But through this approach, we're taking the food to them, and that, I think, is the difference."

Knowing that the approach could work, in summer 2019 Prairie Family Center refocused their efforts on program sustainability. Rather than work to recruit more family volunteers, they made strategic choices about which neighborhoods had the greatest need and reached out to families that volunteered in previous summers. In 2019, they managed seven sites and served 2,837 meals. By focusing more on sustainability than numbers alone, Prairie Family Center was able to make program improvements, and increase the number of kids served at each site.