



Making the Most of a Moment: Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas

In approved states beginning summer 2023, Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) sponsors can operate non-congregate programs in rural communities without access to a congregate meal site. Find more information in USDA's Implementation Guidance for Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas.

Please reach out to your state agency to confirm the availability of non-congregate meal service and allowable models. Note: States are not required to make the non-congregate option available this summer. State agencies had to submit a plan to USDA by April 1, 2023 for approval to allow non-congregate meal service in summer 2023.

The Opportunity

This is a moment of opportunity. The ability to provide meals to-go greatly increases access to summer meals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, program waivers and flexibilities allowed for non-congregate meals through grab and go programs, pick-up of multiple days of meals, and home delivery programs. *Participation in summer lunch increased by 123% in July 2020 and 101% in July 2021 compared to July 2019 participation. Summer breakfast participation increased by 229% in July 2021 when compared to July 2019.*¹ Unfortunately, when waivers became significantly less available in summer 2022, summer meals participation returned to pre-pandemic numbers.

Non-congregate meal programs are effective at reaching children with summer meals, and for the first time, there is a permanent option available to provide non-congregate meals to rural communities.

¹ Food Research & Action Center. (January 2023). HUNGER DOESN'T TAKE A VACATION: Summer Nutrition Status Report. Food Research & Action Center. Available at: https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Summer-Report-2022_final.pdf

When young people lose access to school meals, they lose access to an important source of nutrition. For families, summertime means increased food costs and for some, the uncertainty of whether their children have the nutrition they need to continue to learn and grow. Access to summer meals is key to child nutrition and healthy development.

This resource outlines what you need to know about summer 2023 non-congregate meal service in rural areas. It also highlights ways that you can get involved to increase access to summer meals in your community.

Definitions

Congregate meal service: Meals must be consumed at the site location. Note: children may take one fruit, vegetable, or grain item off-site for later consumption.

Non-congregate meal service: Meals are served to either children or caregivers on behalf of their child and can be consumed away from the site location.

Rural community: For summer 2023 operations, meals must be served in [rural areas](#) as defined by Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) regulations ([7 CFR 225.2](#)): (a) *any area in a county which is not a part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area² or;* (b) *any “pocket” within a Metropolitan Statistical Area which, at the option of the state agency and with FNS concurrence, is determined to be geographically isolated from urban areas.*

This [map](#) outlines metropolitan areas in purple. The areas not highlighted are deemed “rural” by USDA. USDA also allows for “pockets” of rural areas within purple metropolitan areas. Sponsors can work with their state agency to determine “pockets” of rural areas in your state. No Kid Hungry has added additional layers to our [summer mapping tool](#) which shows areas that may be eligible as rural “pockets” upon state agency and USDA approval.

Access to a congregate site: Defined by state agencies. As guided by USDA, state agencies should consider information including but not limited to any physical conditions or other barriers; limited capacity of a congregate site that prevents it from serving the community at large; sites serving the same children on different days, different weeks, or for different meals on the same day; and sites appealing to specific age groups or to children with unique dietary requirements. *Find more information in USDA’s [Implementation Guidance for Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#).*

Eligible individuals: Individuals eligible to receive free summer meals include children and teenagers aged 18 and younger. Individuals aged 19 years and older who are enrolled in school programs for persons with disabilities may also receive free summer meals. *Note: In this resource, the term “children” will be used to broadly refer to all individuals eligible for free summer meals.*

² A Metropolitan Statistical Area is defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as a location where there is at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more population, plus adjacent territory, which has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties, based upon census data. Current delineations are based on 2010 standards. OMB plans to publish delineations of areas based on the 2020 standards and 2020 Census data in 2023 for use in summer 2024.

Considerations for Non-Congregate Meal Service

For all non-congregate meal service models:

- Both sponsors of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) may provide non-congregate meal service in states approved for summer 2023 non-congregate operations in rural areas.
- Non-congregate meal service can only be used in locations that are considered rural and without access to a congregate site. See definition of “rural” above.
 - Sponsors should work with their state agency and FNS Regional Office to identify rural “pockets” or rural areas within a [Metropolitan Statistical Area](#).
- Sponsors can utilize both congregate and non-congregate meal service models. For example, sites in eligible communities can serve congregate meals Monday through Friday and non-congregate meals Saturday through Sunday. Or if a program only offers an in-person lunch service, children can consume lunch on-site and take home a breakfast for the following day.
- Up to two meals, or one meal and one snack, per child, per day may be offered (in any combination except lunch and supper). *Please reference USDA’s guidance: [Offering Multiple Meals as Part of Summer Non-Congregate Meal Service](#)*
 - With state agency approval, sponsors can distribute up to 10 calendar days of meals at one time.
- Meal service times must be established and approved by the state agency that oversees summer meals. Approved pick-up schedules or delivery plans may meet this requirement.
 - Unlike congregate meal service, sponsors operating non-congregate sites are not required to serve breakfast in the morning or allow one hour between the end of one meal service and the start of the next.
- Meals may be distributed to caregivers to take home to children using a process to ensure eligibility of children.
- Allowable meal service models may include grab and go programs, multiple days worth of meals picked up at once, and home delivered meals.

Please reference [USDA’s Implementation Guidance for Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#) and any additional state-level guidance for more information about offering non-congregate meals.

***Want to learn more about summer meals?
Check out the Center for Best Practice’s [website!](#)***

Ways to Support Non-Congregate Meals in Your State

- Work with the state agency that oversees summer meals to learn about what is allowable in your state.
 - Ask your state agency what types of support they need to maximize the availability of non-congregate summer meals.
 - If you are a current summer meals sponsor or are interested in sponsoring and or serving summer meals, contact your state agency to learn more.
- Ensure your network and community knows about the availability of free meals this summer.
 - Find strategies, sharable language, downloadable graphics, and sample social media posts in No Kid Hungry's [Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#).
- Visit a site! Coordinate a site visit with a local program provider. Consider engaging local media to further spread the word.
- Advocate for the expansion of non-congregate summer meals. Right now, non-congregate meals are only available in rural areas without access to a congregate meal site. However, we know that all communities can benefit from a “to-go” program. Inform your Congressperson about the benefits of non-congregate meals in all communities.

