



Expanding Programmatic Reach Through Freeze and Thaw Meal Programs

When the staff at St. Mary’s Food Bank in Northern Arizona looked at their service area, they saw a need for summer and afterschool meals in areas not traditionally served by hot and cold meal service providers. St. Mary’s Food Bank serves 9 out of 15 Arizona counties and covers 81,000 square miles.

Rural communities, like St. Mary’s service area, make up 19.3% of the population of the U.S. but 97% of the landmass of the U.S.¹ Rural schools and community organizations have to cover larger geographic areas than their urban counterparts in addition to facing higher transportation costs to feed fewer children across more locations.

Thinking creatively, St. Mary’s staff decided to pilot a freeze and thaw meal program. In this program, the main items are frozen, combined with shelf stable favorites, and delivered to distant partners that reach every corner of their county. Once on-site, the staff would thaw the meals and serve them to kids.

This program can be used as a part of a reimbursable summer meal or afterschool meal program. Freeze and Thaw can be used at congregate and non-congregate summer meal sites.

This resource will explain how to start your own freeze and thaw program and tips and tricks to make it successful.

The Basics

Main meal items are frozen and transported along with some shelf stable items to distant meal sites. Frozen meal items are then thawed, paired with shelf stable items to make a completely reimbursable meal, and served at meal time.

Procurement & Menu Planning

All meal components are gathered at a convenient location, typically a food bank or organization's central location or warehouse.

Combining shelf-stable side items and frozen mains is recommended to reduce costs and ensure consistency in meal quality. Examples of St. Mary's Food Bank menu items are below:

1. The main items, such as sliders, bean and cheese burritos, and sun butter uncrustables, are frozen.
2. Shelf stable sides, like veggie and fruit cups or applesauce, are used to meet the remaining meal requirements.

Menus are on a 1 to 2-week rotating schedule. This rotation keeps the menu provides a wide enough gap between meal types to keep the children interested.

To reduce up-front set-up costs on new sites, the lead organization can provide fridges, freezers, and/or coolers at each site. Microwaves and shelving units may also be needed in order for sites to store and reheat meals.

Purchasing cold storage and other equipment is an additional cost for the sponsoring partner, so should only be done where appropriate. Working with existing food pantries, schools, churches, or other sites with kitchens can help ease the set-up cost burden.

Transportation

To ensure smooth distribution, consider these three options for meal delivery:

1. Organizational trucks can deliver meals to each program site.
2. A contracted vendor can deliver meals to each program site.
3. A centralized location can be used as a headquarters for program sites to pick up meals.

Depending on the size of the service area, each site's capacity for storage, and the availability of delivery drivers, deliveries can be made once a month or more infrequently. There are a few items you will need to transport frozen items like freezer blankets and freezer bins to keep items at the appropriate temperature.

Site Staff Training

Well-trained, happy staff and volunteers are crucial to ensure day-to-day operations run smoothly.

1. Mix on-site and off-site training to give staff a better perspective on meal service.
 - a. Train on-site to build the relationship with on-site staff. Training is just as much about thawing food safely as building a working relationship with the on-site staff members.
 - b. Train off-site to allow staff to see other meal site operations and have a distraction-free area to learn how to run a meal site operation. If you provide off-site training, remember to reimburse staff for the cost of travel, the potential cost of child care, and provide meals.
 - c. Visit meal sites regularly for inspections and monitoring. Regular visits will also allow time to collect feedback from site staff and families.

Day to Day Operations

Delivery & Storage - Meals are delivered by sponsoring agency or contracted vendor. Staff and volunteers should store frozen food in a freezer on site and only thaw meals for the number of participants each day. All non frozen meal components should be stored at least 6 inches off the ground in a cool, dry location.

Thaw - The day before meal service begins, staff and volunteers should move frozen meal components for the number of expected participants to the refrigerator to thaw overnight. This process is repeated each day to move frozen menu items into the fridge to thaw overnight. Uneaten meals can be re-frozen once within seven days of thawing as long as the meal's temperature stays below 41 degrees.

Meal Service - Meal service will run similar to most summer or afterschool meal distributions. Staff and volunteers will pack meals, hand them out to participants, and complete tracking requirements.

Lessons Learned

St. Mary's Food Bank has been operating a freeze and thaw meal program for seven years. They shared the lessons they learned along the way.

1. Start Small
 - a. Starting small and growing gradually is key to success of any program, especially where resources may be limited. St. Mary's started their operation in 2017 by piloting one site with a one week rotating menu.
2. Creative Partnerships
 - a. Think outside of the box when looking for program sites and partners. Meal sites can be anything from a school to a library or a fire station. Connect with the leaders in the community to find out where people already gather and what trusted spaces could be available to host meals.
3. Continuous Feedback
 - a. Feedback from both participants in the meal program and the staff running the sites will help you adjust the program to best serve the communities needs. Regular surveys, focus groups, or informal interviews during meal time can solite the feedback needed. To learn more about how to best collect feedback refer to our [Conversation Starters for Designing More Inclusive School Meals Programs](#).

