

Summer Meals: The Importance of Flexible Meal Service for Rural Families

NON-CONGREGATE SUMMER MEALS ARE A CRITICAL TOOL TO REACH KIDS WHERE THEY'RE AT WITH THE NUTRITION THEY NEED

OVERVIEW

For kids who receive school meals, the summer months can be the hungriest time of year. And while summer meals programs were designed to help connect kids with the nutrition they need when schools are closed, they've historically reached only a fraction of eligible children.

Before the pandemic, 6 out of 7 kids who may have needed summer meals were missing out. **That's because major barriers stood in the way.**



Restrictive Serving Rules: Kids must eat meals at the site at a specific time of day, which may not align with parent work schedules.



Lack of Transportation: Getting kids to summer meal sites is more difficult in the summer when school buses don't run. Many sites are miles away from a child's home and serve meals during the day when many parents are working.



Weather: Many sites operate outdoors and are forced to close during extreme heat, tornadoes and storms.



Limited Eligibility: Open sites, with meals available to all children, are only able to operate in communities where 50% or more of kids qualify for free or reduced price school meals.



Red Tape: Bureaucracy and confusing rules for staff to navigate can discourage many organizations from participating.

But now that's changing.

At the end of 2022, Congress approved a significant investment in how we reach kids with the food they need during the summer – an incredible step forward in ending childhood hunger in the U.S and one of the most consequential changes to federal nutrition programs in years¹.

Families now have a variety of tools available to meet their unique needs, including a permanent option in rural areas to pick up summer meals for their kids or have those meals delivered through what is referred to as “non-congregate” meal service. Non-congregate meals help supplement other meal services in the summertime and provide much-needed relief for families and kids.

KEY FINDINGS

In a national survey of rural families between July and August 2023, 600 parents reported on unique hardships they faced during the summer when school is out².

Families in rural areas face increased hunger and hardship in the summer.

- **61%** of rural families say they **don't have enough money** for food during the summer

- **73%** say it's **harder to make ends meet** during the summer than during the school year
- **82% spend more on groceries** when their children are out of school for the summer
- Families spend an average of **\$168 more on groceries** each month during the summer.

Non-congregate summer meals help fill the gap for families in rural areas who face barriers to traditional meal service.

- **58%** of families say they'd **prefer to take meals home** while **23%** said they'd **prefer their children eat meals on-site.**
- Families that prefer non-congregate meals services feel that they're **more convenient, comfortable and flexible.**
- **72%** of families said they would be **likely to participate in non-congregate meals** if it was available in their communities.
- Having the ability to pick up **3 to 5 days' worth of meals** at once is an important feature for non-congregate meal service according to survey respondents.

Non-congregate meal service, together with congregate meal service, represents important summer nutrition resources for families living in rural areas.

- Although non-congregate meals are an important option for families, **families also see on-site meals as an important resource when available to them.**
- **65% of families said they would be likely to participate in on-site meals** if it was available in their communities.

THE BOTTOM LINE

All kids deserve a happy, hunger-free summer, and when kids receive consistent access to nutritious meals all year long, they feel better, learn more, and grow up stronger. The new rural non-congregate meal option will go a long way to help kids and families during the summer, and close the summer meal gap. The convenience and flexibility of non-congregate meals lowers barriers to access and increases the likelihood families are to participate.

Now that non-congregate summer meals are a permanent option for rural communities, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, state agencies, program sponsors, and advocates must work to expand access and reach of this important option for families. Non-congregate meal service options are an essential tool for families in the summer and they work alongside other programs, like traditional summer meals and grocery benefits to buy food.

CONTACTS

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ABOUT NO KID HUNGRY

No child should go hungry in America. But millions of kids in the United States live with hunger. No Kid Hungry is working to end childhood hunger by helping launch and improve programs that give all kids the healthy food they need to thrive. This is a problem we know how to solve. No Kid Hungry is a campaign of Share Our Strength, an organization committed to ending hunger and poverty. Join us at NoKidHungry.org.

²Panzera, A.D., Kirk-Epstein, M., Del Puppo, L., Vega, C.W., Pokorney, P., Metz, D., Han, D. (2023). "2023 Survey of Rural Families and Summer Meal Service." Share Our Strength-No Kid Hungry, with FM3 Research. Available at: <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/2023-summer-meals-survey-rural-families>