



Successful Non-Congregate Meal Service Models for Rural Areas: Implementation Guide (2024 Update)

With the passage of [federal legislation](#) in December 2022 and USDA's announcement of its [interim final rule](#) in December 2023, Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) sponsors across the country can now operate non-congregate programs in rural communities without access to a congregate meal site. For more information, see USDA's webpage about [non-congregate summer meals](#), which links to numerous guidance documents and resources.

This resource outlines effective non-congregate meal service models. Use this guide to find strategies and tactics to execute a successful non-congregate summer meals program in your rural community.

Please contact your state agency to confirm the eligibility of your proposed service area and model.

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Definitions

Congregate meal service: Meals must be consumed on site in a supervised setting. Note: children may take one fruit, vegetable, or grain item off-site for later consumption.

Non-congregate meal service: Meals are provided to either children or caregivers on behalf of their child for off-site consumption of all meal components.

Rural community: Non-congregate meals must be served in [rural areas](#) as defined by SFSP regulations ([7 CFR 225.2](#)). For 2024 and subsequent years, USDA has adopted a more expansive definition, which counts as rural: *(a) any area in a county which is not a part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area; (b) any area in a county classified as a non-metropolitan area based on USDA Economic Research Service's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) and Urban Influence Codes (UIC); (c) any census tract classified as a non-metropolitan area based on USDA Economic Research Service's Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes (RUCA); (d) any area of a Metropolitan Statistical Area which is not part of a Census Bureau-defined urban area; (e) any area of a State which is not part of an urban area as determined by the Secretary; (f) any subsequent substitution or update of the aforementioned classification schemes that Federal governing bodies create; or (g) any "pocket" within a Metropolitan Statistical Area which, at the option of the state agency and with FNSRO approval, is determined to be rural in character based on other data sources.*

This [map](#) highlights in green the areas that are part of USDA's "core" definition of rural. Even though this definition has greatly expanded for 2024, the regulations still allow for rural "pockets" to be identified within metropolitan areas. Please work with your state agency if you wish to serve what you think may be considered a "pocket." Note that your USDA regional office will need to concur with the state agency's assessment to gain approval.

Access to a congregate site: Defined by state agencies. USDA encourages state agencies to 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.

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.*

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. States may not deny a sponsor solely based on intent to provide non-congregate service if otherwise eligible.
- 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.

Considerations for Non-Congregate Meal Service (cont.)

- Sponsors and even sites can utilize both congregate and non-congregate models if services conducted different times and there is a system in place to prevent duplication.
 - Sites can serve congregate meals Monday through Friday and provide non-congregate meals for Saturday and Sunday.
 - 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.
 - A site may try to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the state agency that it is serving different groups of children through its congregate vs. non-congregate services.
- 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](#)*
 - Sites may distribute up to 10 calendar days of unitized meals at one time. State agencies may only limit distribution to fewer days on a case-by-case basis.
 - Sites offering bulk meals may issue up to 5 calendar days of meals at one time but may seek state agency approval to distribute up to 10 calendar days of meals at one time.
- Meal service times must be established and approved by your state agency. 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 without a child present if there is a process to reasonably ensure the caregiver has eligible children. Formal guardianship is not required.
 - States may only limit this flexibility on a case-by-case basis.



Meal Distribution Models

Choose a model or mix of models that work best for your sites, staff, and community.

Drive-thru or curbside pick-up

In drive-thru or curbside pick-up models, most families arrive by car to receive meals. Families drive to the pick-up spot, and the meals are loaded into their cars outside. This model is best for meal programs planning to distribute multiple meals at one time. It also is ideal for communities with one or multiple easily accessible, central locations where meal distribution can take place. Multi-day meal packs result in a larger quantity of food leading to heavy boxes or bags, and a drive thru or curbside model accommodates the large quantity of food.

Things to consider:

- Caregivers or families may stay in their vehicles while receiving meals. Some families may prefer this to remain more anonymous.
- Establish a distribution point that allows for a line of waiting vehicles without backing up onto the street.
- Think about weather conditions. Consider purchasing a tent and other inclement weather gear for your staff.
- Sites should use clear signage – in multiple languages, as applicable – to advertise the availability of free summer meals.
- Offer a separate line for families that walked to the site or used public transportation. Consider offering smaller bundles of meals or loaning grocery carts for the summer.

Walk-up distribution

In this model, most families arrive at a location to pick up meals without a vehicle. Locations can be indoor or outdoor. Individual meals or multi-day meal packs are provided to children or caregivers on behalf of their children with this grab-and-go model. Walk-up distributions are ideal for communities with central locations easily accessible by public transportation, car, or walking. It is also ideal when fewer meals are provided at one time to accommodate those walking or taking public transportation.

Things to consider:

- If offering multi-day meal packs, consider offering smaller bundles or lending grocery carts to families walking or using public transportation.
- Remember to think about weather conditions. Consider purchasing a tent and other inclement weather gear for your staff or distribute the meals indoors.
- If sites are indoors, be sure to clearly identify where people should go to receive the meals.
- Both indoor and outdoor sites should use clear signage visible to passers-by to advertise the availability of free summer meals.

Meal Distribution Models (cont.)

Mobile route distribution

With non-congregate meal distribution via mobile routes, sponsors use a vehicle to travel to multiple site locations. Similar to congregate mobile models, non-congregate mobile routes are ideal in areas where families face transportation difficulties and areas with few central gathering points. Sponsors utilizing non-congregate mobile routes may be able to add more site locations to routes because vehicles do not need to wait for meals to be consumed.

Things to consider:

- This model works well for individual meals and multi-day meal packs.
- For schools, consider using known bus routes with stop locations familiar to families.
- Select accessible locations near where families live, like parks, housing communities and apartment complexes.
- Apps and websites like [Here Comes the Bus](#) and [Where's the Bus](#) can be used by families to track where the bus or vehicle is along the meal service route. This prevents families from missing meal distributions if the vehicle is running early or late.

Direct home delivery

Direct home delivery provides potential anonymity and the greatest convenience for those with schedule conflicts, health issues, or transportation barriers. Delivery was highly favored by families surveyed in Summer 2023. Mail, delivery service, or hand-delivery may be utilized. It works best for multi-day meal distributions to save sponsor time and resources.

Things to consider:

- Home delivery requires signed consent from the parent or caregiver prior to initiating delivery.
 - Sponsors must confirm the household's current contact information and identify the correct number of children in each household.
- Both school food authorities (SFAs) and community-based sponsors may do home delivery.
 - Community-based sponsors do *not* need a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with an SFA *unless* the sponsor will obtain school data to identify and invite participants.
- All children within an area-eligible service area may be invited to receive home-delivered meals. If serving children outside of area-eligible locations, then each child must be determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.
- Meals for multiple days may be delivered after verifying the number of eligible children in the house. Usual rules must be followed on the maximum number of meals per child at one time.
- Your state agency may require someone to be present for the delivery due to food safety concerns. If not, consider loaning coolers to keep outside for delivering perishable items.

No Kid Hungry is gathering stories from across the country. Read about how these organizations made non-congregate summer meals a success in their communities:

[Lowcountry Food Bank, Charleston, South Carolina](#)

[Missoula Food Bank & Community Center, Montana](#)

Meal Distribution Logistics

Regardless of model, consider the **equipment or supplies** needed for success.

- Outdoor sites:
 - Shade via pop-up tents or other shelters
 - Rain gear
 - Access to restrooms (for curbside and walk-up models)
 - Indoor option for inclement weather
- Meal transport:
 - Vehicle with hot and/or cold storage (if necessary)
 - Carts or rolling racks
- Meal storage:
 - Adequate refrigerator and/or freezer space
 - Coolers, thermal bags, and Cambros to maintain food temperature
 - Tip: 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.
 - Large plastic totes or milk crates to store meals or meal components
 - Thermometers

Consider the **staffing needs** for your distribution model.

- If low on staff, recruit volunteers or staff outside of your department to support meal distribution and help manage traffic.
- High school and college students are often looking for summer work opportunities or volunteer hours. Hiring young adults may also make your site more approachable to children and teenagers.
- Check out these staffing resources from No Kid Hungry to learn more!
 - [Hiring & Retaining Staff: Your Most Precious Commodity \(webinar recording\)](#)
 - [Staffing Up: Strategies For Working Through Labor Shortage Challenges](#)
 - [Tips For Staffing Summer Meals Programs](#)

Meal Distribution Logistics (cont.)

Be strategic with **meal service times** and the **number of meals provided**.

- If permitted by your state agency, distribute meals for more than one day at one time to ease transportation barriers families may face.
- If this requires too much storage or staff capacity, have different pick-up or delivery days for different areas or locations served by the same central kitchen.
- Meet the needs of children with working caregivers who are unable to come during narrow timeframes during the day. Offer extended hours on certain days or an evening pick-up time rather than just an hour or two around midday.
- Allowing families to pre-order can help you be more accurate with meal prep. Consider a designated time for families to pick up online orders before the time promoted to the general public.

Communication

Ensuring the community knows about your program is critical to reaching children and teens with nutritious summer meals.

- Post clear and up-to-date information on your website. Include information like:
 - Time and location
 - How many meals will be distributed at once
 - The menu
 - Guidance on allergies and special dietary needs
 - Your organization's contact information
 - 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
- Consider using text message or robocall services to reach families.
- Use social media to promote the availability of meals and share updates. Consider paid advertising to target and expand promotion.
- 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 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.

Download and customize social media graphics, template letters to families, banners, flyers, and more with No Kid Hungry's [Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#).

Partnerships and Additional Services

Partnerships can help expand and enhance your summer meals program by offering programming and additional services. Even though children do not have to consume their meals at the meal site, you can still offer enhancements to attract participation.

- Libraries may offer their traveling bookmobile or donate books for children and teenagers participating in the meal program.
- High school students or undergraduate students may be interested in volunteering or in internship/job opportunities with your organization. They can help serve meals and play with kids during the meal distribution.
- Provide fun activities for children and families with your meal distribution. Small things like sidewalk chalk, stickers, or crayons and coloring books can go a long way to make meals more fun.
- Reach out to nutrition education providers like your local SNAP-Ed agency to see if they would be interested in providing services at the site or resources in the meal bags or boxes.
- Health centers and physicians' offices can offer free health screenings or support applying for Medicaid and community health programs.
- Organizations that provide Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application assistance can offer their services alongside meal distribution.
- Work with a food bank or pantry to distribute groceries or other household supplies to caregivers and families during the same time that meals are being distributed.
- 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.

Don't forget to share this resource with a friend or coworker!

