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IMPLEMENTATION OF RURAL NON-CONGREGATE SUMMER MEALS IN 2023: INSIGHTS ABOUT SPONSOR ORGANIZATIONS

Background

Congress took historic action in December 2022 to authorize a permanent, [non-congregate summer meal](#) service option in rural areas without access to congregate meals. This micro-report describes sponsor experiences with implementation during this first official summer of rural, non-congregate meals. These learnings are based upon various data collections, e.g. individual state discussions which included state agency staff, sponsors, and No Kid Hungry (NKH) staff¹; group debriefs with NKH staff and state agencies that included descriptions of sponsor perspectives; analysis of sponsor data reports from organizations receiving NKH summer grants; case study site visits led by NKH; and caregiver interviews led by NKH. The micro-report below highlights sponsor successes, challenges, and opportunities for summer 2024 and beyond.

Key Takeaways from Sponsors on Summer 2023 Implementation

- Sponsors were happy to finally be able to meaningfully reach children in rural areas. A benefit of non-congregate service included more children getting meals.
- Challenges with non-congregate include late rollout of guidance; slow approval processes; limited definitions of qualifying areas; limited flexibilities allowed in the state (e.g., unable to do multiple days' worth of meals); program integrity concerns; unpredictability in participation; and logistical and resource limitations.
- Opportunities exist to boost outreach and marketing, support communications and messaging, and provide non-congregate meals in a manner that is welcoming and responsive to family circumstances.



Like sponsors, overall state agencies also felt like the program was a success—new kids were reached, especially in hard-to-reach places. State agencies acknowledged it was challenging to implement this new program within a short time frame. Summer 2023 was viewed as more of a pilot year, during which many state agencies were conservative in what they allowed, and there are many opportunities to expand non-congregate service in 2024. More detail on state agencies, including a [micro-report](#) and [survey research brief](#), is available at: <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/research?tab=summer-meals>.

¹ A few state discussions included perspectives from sponsors either directly or through the state's own data collection; for example, two states administered surveys to sponsors and other states summarized prior conversations with sponsors.

Definitions of Rural and Access to a Congregate Site

The most common definition of “rural,” cited by just over half of NKH summer grantees (57%) was the USDA County-Level Rural Designation (**Table 1**). When asked if they felt limited on where they could provide meals based on their state’s definition of rural, 26% said it limited them “a little,” 15% said “a lot,” and 59% said “not at all.”

Table 1. “Rural” definitions used among NKH summer grantees*

DEFINITIONS	# OF GRANTEEES	% OF GRANTEEES
USDA County-Level Rural Designation	62	57%
Rural Urban Commuting Area Codes (RUCA)	13	12%
Locale Codes Individual Pocket Justification	9	8%
Other**	8	7%
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)	6	6%
Rural Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC)	2	2%
Urban Influence Codes (UIC)	0	0%

*Grantees could report multiple definitions; therefore, the number of grantees and percentages exceeds 104 and 100%, respectively.

**Other included: USDA Rural Health Map, a state education department waiver, recommendations from a state agricultural department, a statewide definition, and the SFSP Rural Designation Map.

Most NKH summer grantees were approved by state agencies to serve non-congregate meals prior to the grant award. Still, when asked if they felt limited in where they could provide meals based on their state’s definition of congregate access, 34% said it limited them “a little” and 23% said “a lot,” while 43% felt “not at all” limited.

The inability to operate concurrent co-located congregate and non-congregate meal service, due to unclear and changing guidance, was a barrier. Many sponsors that provide congregate meals at summer school or other enrichment programs were not allowed to do non-congregate service, even if they were serving a separate group of children. However, sponsors indicated that with thoughtful integrity plans and communication with families, they could operate concurrent congregate and non-congregate service without kids receiving duplicate meals.

Meal Distribution Flexibilities and Models

The two most cited distribution models reported by NKH summer grantees were walk-up distribution (69%) and drive-thru/curbside distribution (63%). These two accounted for 75% of all distribution models chosen, both of which are forms of grab-and-go (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Meal distribution models implemented by No Kid Hungry summer grantees*

MEAL DISTRIBUTION MODELS	# OF GRANTEEES	% OF GRANTEEES
Walk-up	72	69%
Drive-thru/curbside	66	63%
Along bus/mobile route	37	36%
Direct home delivery	25	24%
Home delivery via mail	1	1%

*Grantees could report multiple meal distribution options, resulting in frequency and percent exceeding 104 and 100%, respectively.

Analysis of NKH summer grant reports found the most cited reasons for choice of meal distribution model(s) were: current guidance (66%), distance to sites from families (65%), access to transportation (62%), and staff capacity (58%). Combined, these four reflect 55% of all cited reasons for choice of distribution model(s) (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Reasons for selection of meal distribution type by No Kid Hungry summer grantees*

MEAL DISTRIBUTION RATIONALE	# OF GRANTEES	% OF GRANTEES
Current USDA/state guidance	69	66%
Distance between families/sites	68	65%
Family access to transportation	64	62%
Staff capacity	60	58%
Funding available	45	43%
Family preferences	34	33%
Equipment	31	30%
Population groups	26	25%
Partnerships	26	25%
Family safety	20	19%
Staff safety	16	15%
Procurement	10	10%
Other**	2	2%

*Grantees were able to report multiple reasons, resulting in the number and percent exceeding 104 and 100%, respectively.

**“Other” reported city park location and other schools having a delivery bus.

As for program flexibilities used by NKH summer grantees, 92 (88%) offered parent/guardian meal pickup without the child needing to be present, multi-meal distribution, and/or bulk foods pickup, and only 12% indicated that they did not offer any of these options. The most cited types of non-congregate meals were shelf-stable meals and refrigerated unitized meals (61% and 55% of NKH summer grantees, respectively) (**Table 4**).

Table 4. Types of meals served by No Kid Hungry summer grantees*

MEAL DISTRIBUTION MODELS	# OF GRANTEES	% OF GRANTEES
Shelf stable meals	63	61%
Refrigerated unitized meals	57	55%
Frozen unitized meals	33	32%
Bulk food items	28	27%
Other	19	18%
Serving line	19	18%

*Grantees were able to report multiple types; therefore, the number and percentages exceed 104 and 100%, respectively.

The NKH-led case studies further refined our understanding of how different non-congregate service model types performed. The mobile meals model worked well where implemented. The sponsor carefully considered the neighborhoods that were highest-need and designed plans to successfully set up mobile meals there. The case study utilizing grab-and-go worked least well—it was the least convenient for families and didn't offer the choice of meals and multiple days' worth of meals that families preferred. Grab-and-go also subjected families to some of the same inconveniences, discomfort, and scrutiny of congregate meals (e.g., families being turned away if their children were home sick). Although these case studies provide a good deep-dive into the implementation of different non-congregate models, they are not generalizable to the broader community of programs across the U.S.

Administrative Processes and Approvals

Overall, sponsors experienced challenges implementing non-congregate meal service due to the late roll out of guidance, slow approval processes, limited definitions of “rural,” and state-level operational limitations (e.g., unable to do multiple days' worth of meals). Sponsors were generally unsatisfied with the speed of rural approval, although experiences varied by state, as seen in individual state discussions. However, sponsors in some states shared that their state agencies were encouraging and helpful during the application process and the implementation of non-congregate meal service, according to a NKH staff debrief.

Program Integrity

Sponsors took steps to protect program integrity. For example, sponsors modified the structure of their program (e.g., where and when they distributed meals) to protect against “double dipping” in the program, according to a NKH staff debrief. However, sponsors also felt stress due to unclear guidance from government agencies and fear of unintentionally breaking rules. Clear guidelines, guidance, and best practices are therefore needed. Sponsors also felt that having a dedicated state agency staff person to work with them on program integrity plans would streamline communication and increase confidence in implementation.

Conclusions

Successes

Sponsors were thrilled at the extended reach non-congregate meal service provides their communities. NKH summer grantees felt the increase in children receiving meals was an important benefit of non-congregate service. Sponsors also felt that their partnerships and connections with local community organizations were key to successful programming. They took pride in offering high-quality, nutritious meals. Many sponsors also found non-congregate meals to be more financially viable than operating traditional congregate meals.



Challenges

Sponsors shared with state agencies their general struggles related to staffing, costs of implementation, and transportation. In case studies, sponsors emphasized the need for funds to cover storage space for food and delivery, especially walk-in freezers, refrigerators, coolers, thermal bags, refrigerated trucks, and vacuum sealers. Program reach was also impacted by limited marketing and promotion from state agencies and sponsors; and a lack of branded materials, vehicles, and signs according to group debriefs with state agencies and NKH staff.

The three challenges most frequently reported by NKH summer grantees were similar: transportation and logistics of meals (46%), unpredictable meal counts (35%), and staffing capacity (25%) (**Table 5**). Despite offering a variety of meal distribution models (i.e., bulk meals, home delivery, parent pickup, etc.), 47% of NKH summer grantees identified families that still encountered challenges to accessing their local meals. Lack of available transportation to distribution sites and the distribution times were the most commonly reported challenges to families' program access. Among NKH summer grantees who identified family access challenges, 90% made adaptations to improve accessibility and 86% of respondents felt the adaptations were sufficient. The most common adaptations were to add distribution sites (40%) and increase home delivery offerings (31%), followed by extended pickup times (12%) and additional marketing (9%). NKH summer grantee narratives highlight the quick pivoting sponsors took to adapt summer non-congregate meal programs to overcome families' access barriers.

Table 5. NKH summer grantees' reported challenges and adaptations

	REPORTED CHALLENGE	# OF GRANTEES	% OF GRANTEES	HOW GRANTEES USED NKH FUNDING TO ADDRESS REPORTED CHALLENGES
Meal Service Logistics	Transportation and logistics of meals	48	46%	Bolster transportation by purchasing or renting additional vehicles or covering gas Purchase hot/cold food storage equipment and packaging (e.g., boxes, bags, etc.).
	Procurement of food, packaging, equipment	25	24%	
	Storage restriction	2	2%	
	Transportation issues	1	1%	
Program Planning	Unpredictable meal counts	36	35%	
	Uncertainty/ability to plan	16	15%	
	Lack of planning time	14	13%	
Staffing	Limited staffing capacity	26	25%	Increased staff wages, including: • Extra stipends for AmeriCorps • Pay for drivers and site staff to serve at additional sites • Pay for additional staff to package meals
	Low staff wages	16	15%	
	Staffing retention	12	11%	
	Need for staff training	4	4%	
	Recruiting new staff	4	4%	
Program Finances	Increased costs with program operations	17	16%	
	Finances	15	14%	

Lessons Learned

Sponsor successes and lessons learned were captured through discussions and surveys. The majority of learnings shared by NKH summer grantees involved planning early and centering the end-user (i.e., children and families) in designing meal service. Program logistics learnings included considering online ordering, addressing transportation options, and offering distribution times that allow for predictable service and family-centered schedules. NKH summer grantees noted that the selection of sites must be informed by their proximity to children and parents in addition to the likelihood that sites (both old and new) may experience increased needs. Meal service requires dedicated, skilled staff; grantees said increases to staff pay should be explored and staff-to-site ratios and staff training should be considered in planning. Partnerships should be built with schools, parks, community centers, recreation programs, churches, and others to identify places where summer meals can be served and marketed. To raise awareness, NKH summer grantees learned that advertising should start early, use banners and flyers, and leverage social media. A number of these insights were echoed in individual discussions with state agencies relaying learnings from their own data collections with sponsors.

Case studies and caregiver interviews revealed opportunities for improved customer service and communications to address participation barriers and create a more positive participant experience. First, program rules should be clearly communicated to families in advance. After arriving at non-congregate sites to pick up meals, some parents were told that children need to be present, which is an inconvenience and may cause feelings of stress and shame. Secondly, families interviewed frequently premised their remarks with “if this exists next year” and worry it won’t be available in the future. Non-congregate summer meal service needs to convey permanence, reliability, and consistency. Third, families often worry they are taking something away from those that might need it more. Sponsors should stress to families that their participation helps their community and school. Sponsors can also challenge program misconceptions and frame participation positively, including that income eligibility is not a factor. Finally, it can help to designate a point person who is welcoming and can answer families’ questions.

Recommendations for Sponsors

Our data collections, as well as the Interim Final Rule, informed recommendations for sponsors.

Meal service types & flexibilities

- Offer meal delivery whenever possible. Caregiver interviews highlighted the benefit of home delivery, since caregivers who cannot physically attend a location can still make sure their children receive meals for which they are eligible. Yet, the home delivery model was not highly utilized in summer 2023. The home delivery option provides a pathway for children to receive meals while overcoming barriers typically encountered when having to physically attend meal sites, for example at congregate meal service sites or grab-and-go non-congregate meal service.
- Offer scheduled pick-up times to parents and caregivers for grab-and-go style non-congregate meals. Available pick-up times should be informed by parent and caregiver work schedules and local family routines.
- Offer meals throughout the full duration of summer breaks. Some rural sponsors only offered meals for a portion of the summer break when schools were closed. Offering meals for the entirety of summer breaks assures that children in rural areas have access to meals throughout the summer.

- Offer multiple days' worth of meals to be picked up. Our state agency survey and state campaigns tracker indicated that about 32 states allowed for multi-day meal pickup, with seven days' worth of meals being the most frequently provided amount. This option minimizes the number of journeys that families need to make to receive meals.

Implementation & Operations

- Create and implement training for site staff to improve their knowledge of non-congregate program operations and rules. Our discussions with state agencies and sponsors echoed similar confusions about how to implement aspects of non-congregate meal service in 2023. Similar to the recommendation for state agencies to provide training to sponsors on, for example, program integrity activities, sponsors should offer training to site staff that help improve knowledge about program rules and operations.
- Conduct customer service-oriented training for site staff. Our case studies and discussions with caregivers indicate families value a warm and respectful site environment that is “fun, familiar, and welcoming,” even when those environments are providing non-congregate meals. Customer service-oriented training should build upon site staff’s abilities to create warm and respectful environments, to provide service that promotes dignity and does not stigmatize program participants.
- Design meal pickup processes that are predictable and consistent, site locations that are safe, and meal choices that respond to children’s preferences. Despite schools closing for the summer, parents and caregivers continue to work during this time. Caregiver interviews noted how a given meal service type (grab-and-go, home delivery) was helpful for their particular circumstances. Additionally, the case study findings indicate a desire for meals that both include foods that children enjoy eating and are similar to what is offered in local school meals. Designing a participant-centered, non-congregate meal service experience assures that meals successfully reach children while improving participant experiences.

For more information, the [full report](#) provides details on data collection efforts and summarizes lessons learned from multiple stakeholder groups (i.e., sponsor, state agency, parent/caregiver, No Kid Hungry staff) during summer 2023. Also, the **State Agency Micro-Report** and **State Agency Survey Research Brief** focus specifically on the implementation experience among state agencies.

