

**FEBRUARY 2024**

# STATE AGENCY IMPLEMENTATION OF RURAL NON-CONGREGATE SUMMER MEALS IN 2023

## 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. Congress allowed the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to implement rural non-congregate service in summer 2023 using previous pilot guidance, and directed USDA to issue an Interim Final Rule (IFR) by the end of 2023. This micro-report describes state agency experiences of implementation and the lessons learned from the first official summer of rural, non-congregate meals. Through documented conversations and a survey conducted by No Kid Hungry (NKH), this summary highlights successes, challenges, and opportunities to expand and improve the program in summer 2024 and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

## Key Takeaways from Summer 2023 Implementation

- Overall state agencies felt like the program was a success—new kids were reached, especially in hard-to-reach places.
- It was challenging for states to stand up a new program in a short time frame.
- Summer 2023 was viewed as more of a pilot year, and there are many opportunities for states to expand their rural non-congregate meal programs in 2024.
- State agencies still need additional support going into 2024 to develop administrative best practices, especially with the new guidance in the IFR.

## Program Reach: Number of Sponsors, Sites, and Meals

Based on a survey and debriefs with state agencies, most states implemented rural, non-congregate meals in summer 2023. Among 38 states responding to the survey, 34 had approved plans for operating non-congregate service. The number of non-congregate meal sponsors varied greatly across states, ranging from 1 to 79 sponsors across state agency survey respondents. Half of states reported 16 or fewer sponsors. Many state agencies ultimately opted to approve a smaller number of sponsors during this first official summer. Those that wished more sponsors participated cited two specific barriers: (1) a limited definition of “rural” and (2) an inability to operate congregate and non-congregate concurrently, according to a group debrief with state agencies. Thirty-one state agency survey respondents reported a total of 2,988 sites distributing non-congregate meals.



<sup>1</sup> Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry staff conducted an online cross-sectional survey with 39 state agencies responding, a group debrief with 26 state agencies represented, and individual discussions with 11 states. Given not all respondents answered all survey questions, proportions are based on the number responding to a question.

Most respondent states (84.6%) approved all eligible sponsors for rural non-congregate service. Nineteen respondent states (59.4%) allowed sponsors new to summer meals, while thirteen state agency respondents (40.6%) did not allow new sponsors. Eighteen respondents approved all eligible sponsors and new sponsors, while three state agency respondents neither approved all eligible nor allowed new sponsors. Overall, state agencies felt the number of non-congregate sponsors was not maximized, according to the state agency debrief discussion.

More than a fifth (22%) of meals were served in non-congregate settings, among 24 states that reported the data.<sup>2</sup> NKH will be taking a closer look at official claims data shared by state agencies in early spring 2024.

To track number and type of meals served, many states assigned a designation for non-congregate sites in the claims data (e.g. “NC”), surveyed sponsors, or had sites and/or sponsors add it to a shared spreadsheet. Nine state agency respondents used other measures, e.g., average daily participation obtained automatically from monitoring software or sponsor reports. While some states reported no issues, several others noted the time and resources required to pull and analyze data.

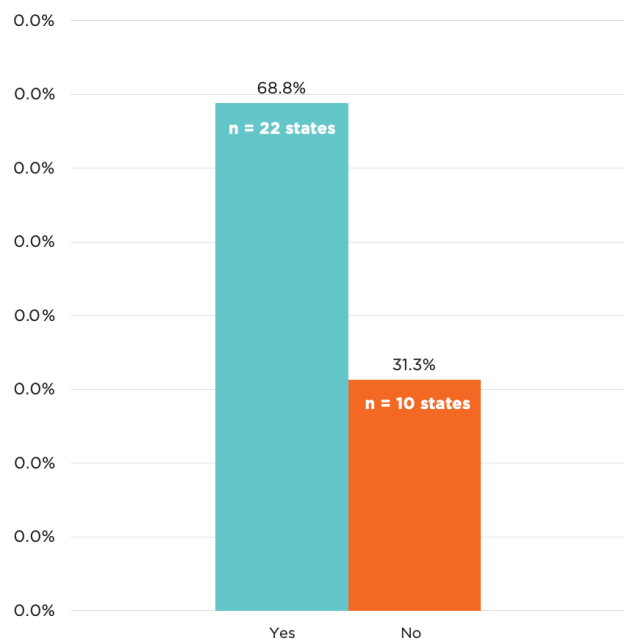
### Definitions of Rural Areas without Congregate Access

State agencies used a range of approaches for defining “access to a congregate meal site,” without a clear, singular definition from USDA. Many states defined lack of congregate access geographically, based on distance to a site (e.g., mile radii ranging from a quarter mile to 10 miles), school district boundaries, or city limits. Sponsor justification, either via application or other information collection, was another common approach. Many state agencies also considered barriers to access, including road safety, transportation, staffing, and operating days (e.g., congregate meals offered on weekdays only).

Due to unclear and changing guidance, one challenge was an inability to operate concurrent, co-located congregate and non-congregate meal service. Many sponsors provide congregate meals at summer school or other on-site enrichment programs. These sponsors faced challenges providing non-congregate service, even if they were serving a separate group of children. During the debriefs, state agencies felt that with thoughtful integrity plans and communication with families they could operate concurrent congregate and non-congregate service without children receiving duplicate meals.

For defining rural areas, twenty-two state agencies considered and approved non-congregate sites located in rural pockets outside of the Rural Designation map (**Figure 1**). The most common data sources for identifying rural pockets had expedited USDA approval, e.g., Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes, Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, and Urban Influence Codes. Other popular sources were National Center for Education Statistics locale classifications and the No Kid Hungry map which maps out sources allowed for expedited USDA approval.

**Figure 1. States (numbers and percentage) that considered and approved rural pockets in Summer 2023\***



\*Based on self-reported data from State Agency Survey

<sup>2</sup> Data are self-reported in the survey and would require confirmation with state data sources to verify totals



### Application and Claims Systems

Given that significant lead time is needed to make changes to application systems, in nearly all states, sponsors had to submit a separate or supplemental application to be considered for non-congregate service. Many states were similarly unable to track non-congregate meals in their claims systems. Since the Interim Final Rule (IFR) was not released until the end of 2023, many states will not have their application and claims systems fully updated for 2024. Others began making changes ahead of the IFR, with recognition that the application will need more modifications in the future.

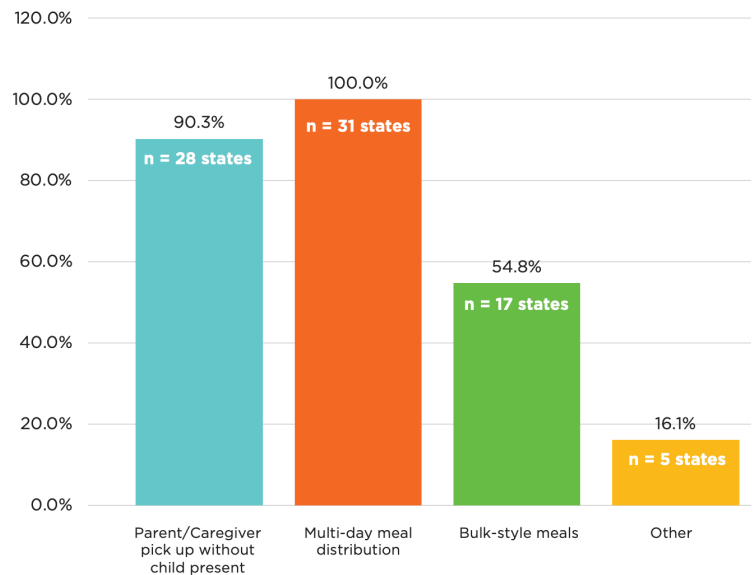
### Meal Distribution Models and Flexibilities

State agencies had the authority to determine which non-congregate models and flexibilities would be allowed. Non-congregate distribution models include walk-up, grab-and-go, mobile meals, curbside pickup, and home delivery. The most typical model allowed was grab-and-go. Only a couple states in the survey and group debrief mentioned mobile meals—this reflects the experiences of those state agencies responding

to questions and are not official estimates of the number of states that did mobile meals. Nine states in the survey and individual discussions allowed home delivery, but this is not necessarily reflective of all states that allowed home delivery. Though only a handful of sponsors opted for home delivery, they reported successful service. The biggest barrier for home delivery was the changing guidance around memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with school food authorities (SFAs) to get income eligibility data for participants.

Many state agencies allowed sponsors to use service flexibilities like multi-day meal issuance and parent/caregiver pickup. Of 31 states responding to the survey question, all 31 allowed multi-day meal issuance, 28 (90.3%) allowed parent/caregiver pickup without their child present, 17 (54.8%) allowed bulk distribution, and 5 (16.1%) allowed other methods. Despite being one of the most frequently allowed options, parent/caregiver pickup of meals without a child present was cited by three states as one of their biggest challenges, particularly with respect to ensuring program integrity and coordinating pickup times (**Figure 2**). Only six states reported non-congregate service outside of area-eligible locations.

**Figure 2. Non-congregate flexibilities offered in Summer 2023\***



\*Based on self-reported data from State Agency Survey

## Program Integrity

State agencies took steps to ensure program integrity. Nearly all state agencies mentioned conducting in-person site monitoring visits for all non-congregate sites to ensure integrity. Most states used a conservative approach to what was allowed in 2023; though, with experience and more guidance, many plan to increase flexible options for sponsors in 2024 (e.g., allowing parent pickup, home delivery, etc.). State agencies emphasized the following actions to ensure program integrity:

- **Monitoring, training, and program integrity plans.** Almost all state agencies surveyed required sponsor program integrity plans and many included site visits, administrative reviews, and/or compliance reviews among sites. Dedicating a state agency staff person to work with sponsors on program integrity plans made for more streamlined communication and confidence in implementation, according to the group debrief.
- **Sponsor requirements.** Three state agencies limited non-congregate sponsors only to organizations with prior experience serving summer meals, while some allowed sponsors who met other criteria, such as sponsors that provided pandemic non-congregate meals or operated the prior year without a surplus. In the debrief, some states discussed only allowing school sponsors, not community-based sponsors. One such state cited fewer program integrity concerns with school district sponsors given their experience with child nutrition programs. Another state cited the lack of USDA guidance and limited staff capacity to provide oversight and technical assistance for community-based sponsors.
- **Limiting program flexibilities.** Some state agencies required parents to show identification to pick up their child's meals, formally attest upon arrival that meals would be given to their child, or required their child be present at pickup. Many states also set a limit on the number of meals provided via multi-day distribution. Other activities included limiting the number of sites,

requiring unitized meals, and requiring special approval for sponsors for home delivery.

Some state agencies had concerns about balancing program integrity measures (e.g., pre-registration, pre-ordering, or “proof” of children) with over-identification of children, according to the group debrief. Surveyed state agencies also cited program integrity concerns related to updating data systems, supporting sponsor compliance (e.g. meal pattern and meal count documentation), and open non-congregate sites. Surveyed state agencies also noted challenges with USDA reporting requirements.

## Conclusions

**Successes.** Overall, state agencies said that the new summer non-congregate service in rural areas allowed more children to get meals and reached families that historically lacked access to congregate sites. In addition to improving participation, many felt that the distribution models (e.g. mobile routes, drive-up sites) and flexibilities (e.g bulk foods) provided them the adaptability needed to get more meals to more kids. Many state agencies look forward to expanding their rural, non-congregate meal service in summer 2024.

**Challenges and Lessons Learned.** Most states struggled with the lack of timely, accurate guidance on aspects of administration and operations, due to the 5-6 month time frame between when rural non-congregate was made permanent by Congress (December 2022) and when Summer 2023 began. Administrative activities particularly challenging in 2023 included program oversight and management, sponsor selection (e.g., application processes as well as ensuring one sponsor per rural area) and education (e.g., training on program rules and eligibility), identification of rural areas, program integrity tasks, and tracking.

State agencies experienced difficulties in receiving consistent data across sponsors, limitations in data granularity to determine whether meals were congregate or non-congregate, and long

wait times to get sponsor data. States made clear technology updates. Upgrades to track meals require more time to complete, and some will not be ready for Summer 2024. Updating Colyar systems is also costly. State agencies that have already accomplished effective separate tracking for congregate and non-congregate sites and meals have done so either by: (1) having separate records (i.e. rows) or (2) by adding fields (i.e. columns) to existing records for congregate and non-congregate meals.

Agency staffing was consistently limited across states. The inability to operate congregate and non-congregate simultaneously, food costs, and packing costs (which is higher for non-congregate) were also concerns. Based on the group debrief, program reach was also impacted by limited marketing and promotion and there is a need for branded materials to create better trust in communities.

## Recommendations for State Agencies

In light of the data collected and the release of the Interim Final Rule, the following actions are recommended for state agencies.

### Administration

- **Allow sponsors to operate all meal service model types, especially home delivery.** This will ensure that non-congregate meal service responds to needs and maximizes participation among eligible families. The home delivery model in particular may be needed to reach families who cannot travel to meal sites because of transportation or other limitations. Every community has their own unique mix of resources, opportunities, and challenges—state agencies should enable sponsors to use all non-congregate model types so that sponsors can design programs that respond to the needs of local communities. Guidance should clearly explain how to successfully execute meal service model types while being in compliance with program rules.

- **Minimize the circumstances in which sponsors are denied the opportunity to utilize the program flexibilities allowed by USDA, including multi-day meals, bulk meals, and parent pickup without a child present.** This will enable sponsors to design programs that truly reflect rural family needs in their communities. State agencies should work closely with sponsors to ensure they can implement these flexibilities. State agencies should also get input from USDA and other state agencies on best practices for how to maximize the availability of these options while still maintaining program integrity. However, it should be recognized that what state agencies allowed in 2023 was also influenced by how much staff they had to provide oversight and monitoring.
- **Maximize the number of sponsors that can participate by developing efficient application processes.** The experiences from summer 2023 show that there needs to be efficient and clear processes for sponsors to submit applications for non-congregate meal service, allowing sponsors enough time to both provide all necessary information to the state agency and prepare for their meal service operations. Timelining for sponsor applications and approvals should be balanced with giving sponsors enough lead time to prepare for summer meal service.



## Sponsor Support

- **Provide ample communication about rural non-congregate meal service as a new opportunity.**

Starting new programs requires continuous and effective communication to ensure all current and potential stakeholders are aware of the opportunity. Because congregate meals have not been a more useful programmatic model in rural communities, there are many community stakeholders that may not already be connected into the Summer Food Service Program or Seamless Summer Option of the National School Lunch Program. State agencies should explore how they can leverage government and non-governmental partners to spread awareness about summer meals programs and bring new stakeholders into the rural non-congregate arena as sponsors, sites, or supporters of the program. Key stakeholders include schools (state associations, school nutrition directors, administration, and educators), community organizations that offer child services, health care, faith-based organizations, and entities such as local, county, and state governmental education, health, and social service agencies such as WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, and others.

- **Provide guidance and technical assistance to sponsors who want to offer both congregate and non-congregate meal service.**

State agencies can provide clear guidelines and requirements for sponsor integrity plans that outline how implementation of both meal services at a single site will conform with program rules. State agencies, learning from the community of sponsors within their state, can disseminate these best practices to uphold program integrity and to prevent children from receiving the same meals from both services. State agencies should provide guidance, either written, in webinar form, or both, to these sponsors; such guidance should clarify how to prepare applications and supporting materials. Work closely with

sponsors to develop operational integrity plans that maximize participation of eligible families with minimal ambiguities.

- **Co-develop effective meal claims processes with sponsors.** Ensure that sponsors know how to clearly document congregate and non-congregate meals in reporting. If systems cannot be changed to make this process easier, make sure that sponsors receive clear reporting instructions to minimize errors in tracking types of sites (congregate, non-congregate, or both) and meals (congregate and non-congregate).
- **Offer educational webinars on non-congregate meal service eligibility and implementation to sponsors.** Some state agencies offered in-person or web-based sponsor education. Training is useful for clarifying application processes and program rules for sponsors. Periodic sponsor education can include a variety of implementation-focused topics that help improve service delivery for program participants while maintaining program integrity. Examples of topics include but are not limited to participant eligibility, meal tracking and reporting, model type discussions (grab-and-go, mobile meal routes, or home delivery), or innovative methods for procurement of products for non-congregate meals (such as pre-sliced or packaged) that respond to sponsor site and family needs. Additionally, some rural sponsors may find traveling to in-person training burdensome, so sponsor training should offer virtual components.

Please visit <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/research> for more details study details and summaries of lessons learned from multiple stakeholder groups (i.e. sponsor, state agency, parent/caregiver, No Kid Hungry staff) during summer 2023.