



FEEDING A CROWD – TIPS FOR CONGREGATE MEAL SERVICE

Requiring children to eat meals onsite can be a challenge in the summer meals program, but it doesn't have to be! This resource provides strategies to make congregate meal service easier for site staff and improve the experience for children and families.

Location, Location, Location

Select a desirable location for your site. Consider where kids, teens, and families gather naturally during the summer months. Some ideas:

- Parks and pools
- Recreation centers and playgrounds
- Splash parks
- Libraries

You can also consider places where parents or caregivers might already be going with their children. Be sure to work with managers or owners wherever you consider. If they do not allow an open meal site, consider an adjacent parking lot. Some ideas:

- Pediatrician offices and WIC clinics
- Laundromats
- Popular shopping and grocery stores

Tip! Have incentives for families that regularly attend. Punch cards with a prize are a great way to maintain participation.

Make the Space Welcoming & Comfortable

If outside, set up a tent if there is no shade, offer picnic tables or blankets, and provide cold water to all. If inside, let your creativity run wild. Streamers, posters, and balloons add fun to your site. Bean bag chairs? Why not?!

Tip! Now that your site is camera ready, why not create a photo booth? Encourage families to share photos and include your site information – a fun activity and a promotional opportunity in one!

Bring on the Fun!

Activities and enrichment components are a fantastic way to draw children to your site, and also keep them there while they eat. Some ideas:

- Coloring and activity worksheets, puzzles, bubbles, sidewalk chalk, stickers, and art supplies.
- Jump ropes, sports balls, hula hoops, frisbees, and board games – who doesn't love Twister?!
- Invite guest and partner organizations to provide activities, such as the local library, police or fire station, local museums, and wildlife associations.

Tip! Need supplies? Ask local businesses for donations or organize a drive ahead of summer.

Secure Additional Staffing

Adequate staffing is critical to program compliance and providing engaging activities for children. If having trouble finding staff, consider partnering with local universities to hire students. High schoolers are also a great option to support activities (and eat a meal) and are often looking to meet volunteer requirements for graduation. **Check out [Tips for Staffing Summer Meals Programs](#) to learn more!**

Communicate Congregate Requirements to Children & Families

Communicate the onsite eating requirement to families early and often. If you have a way to communicate with families ahead of summer, send letters and/or emails with site information, meals and activities offered, and program requirements including that meals must be consumed onsite. Be sure to include onsite eating in all other promotional materials.

Make signage at your site locations indicate that meals must be consumed onsite. Some options for phrasing congregate feeding requirements:

- “Meals must be eaten onsite.”
- “Program food must be eaten onsite.”
- “Children receiving a meal must eat it onsite.”

But remember! **Children can take one fruit, vegetable, or grain with them to consume later onsite.**

Train Staff on Congregate Requirements

Include information on the congregate feeding requirement in annual program training. Sponsors should be direct and transparent about the requirements with site staff. Provide site staff with the tools necessary to succeed including signage, letters to parents or caregivers, and suggested phrasing of the onsite eating requirement. Allow site staff time to practice communicating the requirement through role playing during training. Later in the summer, while sponsors monitor the site, provide additional one-on-one coaching as needed.

Offer Adult Meals

While not reimbursable, adult meals can help create a family-friendly site and encourage everyone to stay onsite to eat. If it's not in your program budget, consider partnering with a local food bank or restaurant to donate meals for adults. You can also seek out grant funding or host fundraising events to serve adult meals. Partnerships can also allow you to provide additional resources like grocery bags, food boxes, or SNAP application assistance.

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