

HOW BULK MEALS MEET THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES

Osage Prairie YMCA, Missouri

“EVERYBODY SHOULD DO THIS,” urges Samie McCollough, Senior Associate Director of the Osage Prairie YMCA, when asked about the summer bulk meal program she runs in Butler, Missouri and surrounding towns.

There are many reasons why she and her community are enthusiastic about the program, which she calls a “grocery grab” in part to avoid the stigma associated with free food distribution locally. First among them is serving 1,500 kids each week, most of whom would not have access to breakfast and lunch options during the summer months otherwise. One mother of five interviewed about her experience participating in the program added,



I was just so thankful for the grocery market. With groceries [prices] going up as much as they have. This will help us survive the summer. You know, because I look at what I do, basically pays the groceries, driving a bus. But I am laid off in the summer. So for them to have the grocery grab, I was just like, oh, praise the Lord. We’ll make it.”

The key distinction between a bulk meal program and other forms of meal service is that in bulk programs, families receive fresh and shelf-stable groceries equivalent to 7 breakfasts and 7 lunches instead of prepared meals. Reimbursements and grants from organizations like No Kid Hungry make it possible for McCollough to cover the costs of operating the summer grocery grab.



Bags of groceries are carefully selected to meet meal pattern requirements. A recent distribution included a bag of apples, tubes of yogurt, a gallon of milk and orange juice, turkey slices, a loaf of whole grain bread, celery, and more. If there are hamburger patties provided, there will also be hamburger buns. With tortillas, grated cheese and an avocado.



The quality of the food is great. It's food the kids eat. It's healthy. It's, you know, there's always vegetables, there's breakfast food, there's sandwich food and bread."

Participants also appreciated the variety. One described how she tries to have apples and maybe bananas for her kids but never the assortment that comes through the grocery grab.



They [kids] probably get a different variety because they change it up about every week. So you might have grapes one week. And apples one week. Bananas and oranges, you know, so they do a really good job of rotating the fruits and vegetables ... I've worked in different things with kids, and so I know there's a lot of kids they don't, their parents just don't buy fruits and vegetables."

A bulk model fits well with the daily lives of families. "It's really easy to pack our sandwiches for lunch because we've got lunchmeat, cheese, butter, jelly. Fruit. I'm just about ready to go. So it





really makes our mornings and lunchtime easier.” Some children eat less. Some children don’t want to eat what is provided at a specific time. Some children like what their sister does not. This type of program allows caregivers flexibility to let children pick and choose among the week’s menu items, eat when it makes sense for them, and save items in a freezer for later use. Nothing goes to waste.

McCollough partnered with a local store, Woods Grocery, to supply the contents for the grocery grab. “The hardest part was in the beginning, when we had to figure out which products met the requirements,” explained Jason Woods, who runs the regional chain.

They worked closely, sharing barcodes for products back and forth and identifying options that meet meal pattern requirements. According to McCollough, “Now they know enough that if something doesn’t come in, or they don’t have enough of something, they know which substitutes will work.” Participants in the grocery grab also use the contents of their bags as the basis for additional grocery purchases for the week.



I have learned to be careful not to go to the store beforehand, because one time I went to the store 2 or 3 days beforehand, I’m like, oh no, I shouldn’t have done that because we get staples - fruit, vegetables, milk. So I’ll go to the grocery grab and then kind of see what we have there, then go to the store and just supplement. What do we need? Salsa, dressings, those kinds of things.”

Get in touch with Samie McCullogh, Senior Associate Director of the Osage Prairie YMCA (smccullough@opymca.org). Have you considered operating a bulk program? Have you sponsored a bulk program that is similar or different from this model? Let us know at NoKidHungry.org or innovation@strength.org.