



Multi-Day Menu Planning: Considerations for Rural Non-Congregate Summer Service

General Considerations

Variations By State: Approval for multi-day meal service varies from state to state and some aspects of menu planning and implementation. Some states have limitations or requirements regarding the service of bulk milk, level of food prep required of families or the number of bulk service days allowed. Always check with your state agency for approval of your program. Be sure to discuss your menu plans to ensure you are in compliance before you begin serving.

Planning: Your menu planning can be greatly affected by whether you are implementing the traditional Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) or the Seamless Summer Option (SSO). Menus under the SSO program can be offered by school food authorities and mirror traditional NSLP meal pattern requirements. Menus served in the [SFSP program](#) may be used by non-school sponsors, have a simplified menu pattern, and often have a higher reimbursement rate.

Food Preparation Required: Does your state require summer food items to be microwaveable or minimally prepared by kids or families without the need for chopping? Consider the needs of your community when considering your menu. Do families have access to ample refrigeration and cooking equipment? Will a caregiver generally be present or should you aim to provide meals that kids and teens can prepare themselves? Some communities prefer fresh bulk groceries that can be made with recipes into meals while others benefit more from shelf stable or individually wrapped items that require little preparation. Consider surveys or focus groups with parents and caregivers when designing your program.

Food Preferences: Ensure you are offering menu items that are familiar and culturally appropriate for children and teens in your community. Ensuring there are some “fan-favorite” items in each menu distribution, even if they are a little more expensive, can increase participation and motivate families to participate in your meal service.

General Considerations, cont.

Packing & Storage:

- Decide what containers to use for meal distribution. Plastic bags, reusable shopping bags, and boxes are popular choices. Make sure all menu items fit well in containers without breaking.
- If many of your families do not arrive by car, make sure your packages are suitable for carrying while walking or public transportation.
- Consider how you pack boxes or bags to put heavy items on the bottom and fragile items like fresh produce on top.
- A popular method is to pack refrigerated items, frozen items, and shelf stable items in separate color coded bags. This allows your team to pack items and store them at the proper temperature in advance. During service, each child receives one of each color bags.
- Another method is to stage boxes in your packing space with shelf-stable items the day before. Then, pack your cold items just prior to distribution.
- If your desired site does not have ample freezer or refrigerator space, consider leasing one from your local vendor for the summer.

Bulk Milk: If providing bulk milk, calculate the number of servings per container to ensure there is enough to meet the number of meals provided in each pick up:

- One gallon of milk equals sixteen 8 oz servings, or eight days of breakfast and lunch servings per child. One half gallon equals eight 8 oz servings, or four days of breakfast and lunch servings per child.
- Consider families picking up for multiple children, their ability to transport multiple gallons of milk and/or those with limited refrigeration when designing your service. Shelf stable milk is a popular option among some sponsors because of its longer shelf life and ease of storage and transport.
- Remember to provide choices of milk variety and/or flavor. Lactose free milk can also be a great option for those with lactose intolerance who might otherwise decline the milk.

What We Know About 2024 Summer Meal Service:

- **Nearly two-thirds of non-congregate sponsors provided multiple days worth of meals** per pickup or delivery in summer 2024.²
- **75% of families prefer multiple days worth of meals for pickup or delivery.** Families especially preferred 5-7 days' worth though 2-4 days' worth was also desired.¹
- **72% of non-congregate sponsors served not only one but a combination of meal types**, such as shelf-stable, frozen, and/or hot meals.²
- While **50% of families prefer large, family-style meals** that parents can portion out for kids, **46% of families would like single-serving meals.**¹
- **40% of parents and caregivers would like meals they can heat up as needed** for kids. **37% would like meals that kids can heat up on their own.**¹
- **Nearly twice as many families preferred bulk milk (39%) more than single-servings of milk (23%).**¹

¹ No Kid Hungry and FM3. (2024). National Family Survey on Rural Non-Congregate Summer Meals. [Report in preparation].

² No Kid Hungry. (2024). Sponsor Survey and Debriefs on Rural Non-Congregate Summer Meals. [Report in preparation].

Considerations for Menu Types

2-5 Day Vs. 6-10 Day Meal Packs: When deciding whether to offer meal distribution once weekly or multiple times per week, consider your staffing and food storage capacity. This must be carefully weighed against the ability of your families to participate in your meal service, transport, and store the amounts of food provided.

- Providing smaller meal packs can be ideal for those with limited storage space or families that walk to sites. This model will require you to serve more frequently, which requires more labor hours.
- Providing larger meal packs are favored by families and sponsors able to transport and store a larger volume of food. This model allows you to serve less frequently, reducing staffing demands while increasing meals served.

Bulk Menu Development: Bulk or “grocery” style meal boxes (e.g., whole heads of lettuce, loaves of bread, packages of cheese, etc.) can be a great way to provide fresh or whole packages of ingredients to families. This menu style can reduce packing labor and is preferred by families in some communities. Consult your state agency to learn about any restrictions or requirements to serving bulk meals or grocery-style boxes.

- Use a menu template to ensure you meet all the program meal pattern requirements and that all items in your distribution can be put together with recipes.
- Bulk menus can be a great opportunity to showcase farm-to-school produce from your local farms. Serve these items with nutrition education for a featured fruit or veggie.
- Consider a co-op with other sponsors to facilitate special orders from manufacturers to package items to accommodate the number of meals you are serving per distribution.
- Include cooking instructions, recipes and menu so families understand how to use all food items to create meals.



Considerations for Menu Types, cont.

Individually Wrapped & Unitized Meals:

- Check with a distributor to make sure you will be able to order and receive the items you want in the quantities you need well in advance of summer feeding.
- Work with your produce distributor or DOD provider to bag up ½ cup servings of fresh fruit and vegetables. Some fruit and vegetables can be combined into one bag, to reduce packaging costs.
- Tray sealing machines can be a great way to utilize commodity foods and implement scratch recipes into single serve containers as an alternative to purchasing individually wrapped items.

Fresh vs. Refrigerated vs. Frozen Items: Many sponsors enjoy providing a mix of fresh, frozen, and refrigerated items. It provides variety and supports families in diversifying their storage needs.

- Use labels or stickers on items to indicate which items should be stored in a pantry, refrigerator, or freezer. You can also provide this information in a print out of instructions.
- Provide instructions for reheating or assembling foods to create the full intended menu for each day. Make sure they are simple enough for a child to prepare if needed.
- Include instructions for how to chop, peel, or prepare fruits and vegetables, keeping in mind that some families may be preparing them for the first time.

Resources

- [Summer Food Service Program Meal Patterns](#)
- [USDA Menu Planner for School Meals](#)
- [Child Nutrition Recipe Box – USDA Standardized Recipes](#)
- [Summer Success: Boosting Participation With Expert Menu Planning](#)
- [Stellar Menu Planning-Florida Department of Education](#)
- [Sample Multi-Day Menus From Summer Sponsors](#)
- [Culinary Resources- Georgia Department of Education](#)

