



Harvest Hope's Non-Congregate Summer Meals Model for Food Banks

Harvest Hope, South Carolina's largest food bank, provides over 25 million meals annually to neighbors in need across the Midlands, Pee Dee, and Upstate regions. Learn how they are expanding their impact by leveraging their existing network to feed more kids with non-congregate summer meals. Erinn Rowe, Harvest Hope's CEO, walks through how the program works and how other food banks can get involved.

When summer break begins, the cafeteria closes and, for thousands of children in South Carolina, that means no access to consistent, nutritious meals. Access to free summer meal programs is a critical safety net, but traditional models, known as **congregate** feeding sites that serve Sun Meals, require children to eat on-site at set times, often posing challenges for working families and rural communities.

That's where **non-congregate** summer meal programs come in, also known as Sun Meals To Go. These flexible programs allow families to grab up to a week's worth of food for their children at once. These meals may be ready to eat, frozen, or shelf-stable and ready to be consumed at home. For Harvest Hope Food Bank, using this model wasn't just practical - it was innovative.

"I'm a big believer in efficiency and making it easier to help people that need it," said Erinn Rowe, CEO of Harvest Hope Food Bank. "Non-congregate food sites are a much better approach, especially in our rural areas."

With a 20-county footprint and partnerships with over 400 agencies, Harvest Hope already had the infrastructure needed to launch this unique summer meal program. They leveraged their existing distribution model, typically used to supply food pantries, and adapted it to become a Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Sponsor, serving non-congregate summer meal kits for children on a small scale. The SFSP, known as Summer Break Cafe in South Carolina, allows sponsors to receive federal reimbursement for eligible meal service.

“We’re basically a logistics and distribution hub for nonprofits,” Rowe explained. “This was just an addition to what we already do - purchasing, packing, reporting, and training so that partners understand how to distribute the meals according to USDA guidelines. Our agency partners managed their sites and distributed the food to the kids.”

In their first summer of offering rural non-congregate meal service in 2024, they started small by onboarding three meal sites, including their headquarters location. They distributed five days worth of ready-to-eat backpack meals (including both frozen and shelf-stable foods) made specifically for children. Weekly or bi-weekly deliveries were arranged depending on each site’s storage capacity, making the process even more accessible.

BY THE NUMBERS

NEED

1 in 6

KIDS IN SOUTH CAROLINA
FACES HUNGER

622,369

KIDS RECEIVING FREE OR
REDUCED-PRICE SCHOOL
MEALS

22%

STATEWIDE CHILD FOOD
INSECURITY RATE

20

COUNTIES SERVED ACROSS
SOUTH CAROLINA

400+

AGENCY FOOD PANTRY
PARTNERS

27M

MEALS DISTRIBUTED
ANNUALLY

HARVEST HOPES
IMPACT

SUMMER MEALS SERVED

3

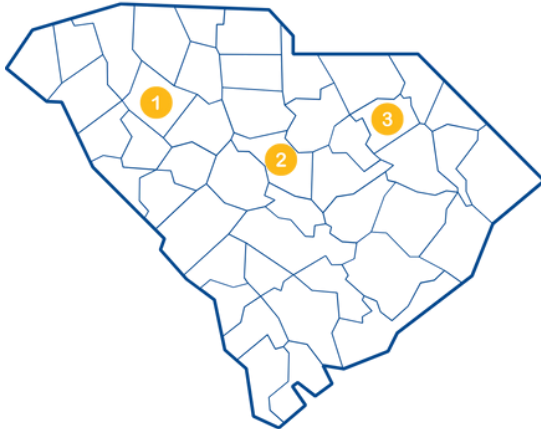
NON-CONGREGATE SUMMER
MEAL SITES

6,000

NON-CONGREGATE SUMMER
MEALS SERVED

1,850

CHILDREN FED AT NON-
CONGREGATE SUMMER
MEAL SITES



In 2024, Harvest Hope partnered with three agencies across three counties that served as summer meal sites to provide rural non-congregate summer meal service.

- 1 Laurens**
- 2 Richland**
- 3 Darlington**

Harvest Hope leaned on local partnerships with South Carolina Empowerment and Care South Carolina to launch the pilot program. By empowering trusted, community-rooted organizations with logistical support and ready-to-go meal kits, the food bank ensured smoother implementation and better reach. “Our partners were thrilled. It gave them the flexibility to feed kids in their own communities, in a way that worked for their families,” Rowe shared.

Meals That Kids Actually Want to Eat

Designed with kids (and parents) in mind, the weekly kits included five days worth of both shelf-stable and frozen options, such as:

- Fun breakfast sandwiches
- Kid-friendly lunch entrees like macaroni & cheese
- Whole grains, fruits, and nutritious snacks

Harvest Hope’s inventory team built 2-3 week rotating menus that met USDA requirements while keeping things fun and accessible. All food was carefully selected based on flavor, quality, and storage considerations.

“We mix it up between frozen, shelf-stable, and refrigerated foods, knowing how much space families realistically have in their homes,” said Rowe. “We wanted it to be something the kids were excited to eat.”

Running a non-congregate program at scale requires a lot of coordination. Thankfully, Harvest Hope already had access to adequate storage and a team of staff and volunteers to help make the work possible.

Each child received two packages per week: one frozen, one shelf-stable. Food was sorted and packed before being delivered to the sites.



Tracking, Reporting & Looking Ahead

Navigating USDA compliance wasn't easy, especially with manual reporting requirements. But the Harvest Hope team created automated systems to streamline guardian check-ins and record-keeping, accounting for real-life scenarios like multiple caregivers picking up food. "Reporting isn't automated yet... but we made it work. We allowed flexibility for caregivers, and that made a big difference." Throughout it all, they prioritized program integrity, ensuring their systems were compliant.

Now, with the learning curve behind them, Harvest Hope is hoping to serve more youth. In 2025, Harvest Hope is aiming to feed 1,500 children each week throughout the summer. They've already built a waitlist of interested agencies and will soon be ready for a lot of growth.

"We're proud to give delicious, nutritious meals to areas that have been overlooked," said Rowe. "Our goal is for children to be healthy, fed, and thriving all summer long."

Harvest Hope's non-congregate summer meal program proves that food banks are uniquely positioned to fill the summer hunger gap.

If you're a food bank looking to launch or expand your own program:

- Start small and build with intention
- Leverage your existing pantry partners
- Plan your budget early since costs will have to be paid upfront
- Consider offering meal kits to external sites as a vendor



**We've created a system that works.
Let's help more kids get fed—together."**



Learn more or partner with Harvest Hope:

www.harvesthope.org

info@harvesthope.org

