



Partnering with Schools, Feeding Communities: ETHRA's Non-Congregate Success

East Tennessee Human Resource Agency (ETHRA), a regional nonprofit serving over 20 counties in Eastern Tennessee, has created a community-powered model to feed thousands of children through non-congregate summer meals. By partnering with school nutrition teams as both local vendors and summer meal sites, ETHRA ensures children in rural and hard-to-reach areas have consistent access to nutritious food during the summer months. Veronica Stephens, ETHRA's Summer Meals Senior Program Director, shares how the program works, what makes it unique, and how other community-based sponsors can adopt a school-centered approach to expand summer food access.

The East Tennessee Human Resource Agency (ETHRA) has been a lifeline for families across more than 20 counties for over 50 years, connecting people to everything from transportation to senior services. But each summer, their impact grows even deeper as they step into the role of a Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsor, delivering meals to children who might otherwise go hungry when school lets out.

ETHRA's non-congregate summer meal model stands out because it's powered by local schools, not centralized warehouses, community kitchens or food banks. In a region where small towns and rural communities dominate, that grassroots approach makes all the difference.



We've built a system that works because we trust the schools and they trust their families," said Veronica Stephens, ETHRA's Summer Meals Senior Program Director. "That relationship is everything."

A Local Model with Big Impact

When summer break begins, the routine disappears and, for many children in East Tennessee, so does daily access to meals. Non-congregate summer meal programs, like USDA’s Sun Meals To Go, are designed to fill that gap by allowing families to grab up to a week’s worth of food to take home.

In 2024, ETHRA’s unique model partnered directly with school systems in 5 counties. Schools act as meal vendors and host pickup sites, handling registration, food preparation, data collection, and family communication. Their model of operating summer meals is decentralized, community-embedded, and focused entirely on the families. “The food isn’t coming from a big truck. It’s coming from the same cafeteria workers these kids see all year,” said Stephens. “That builds trust.”



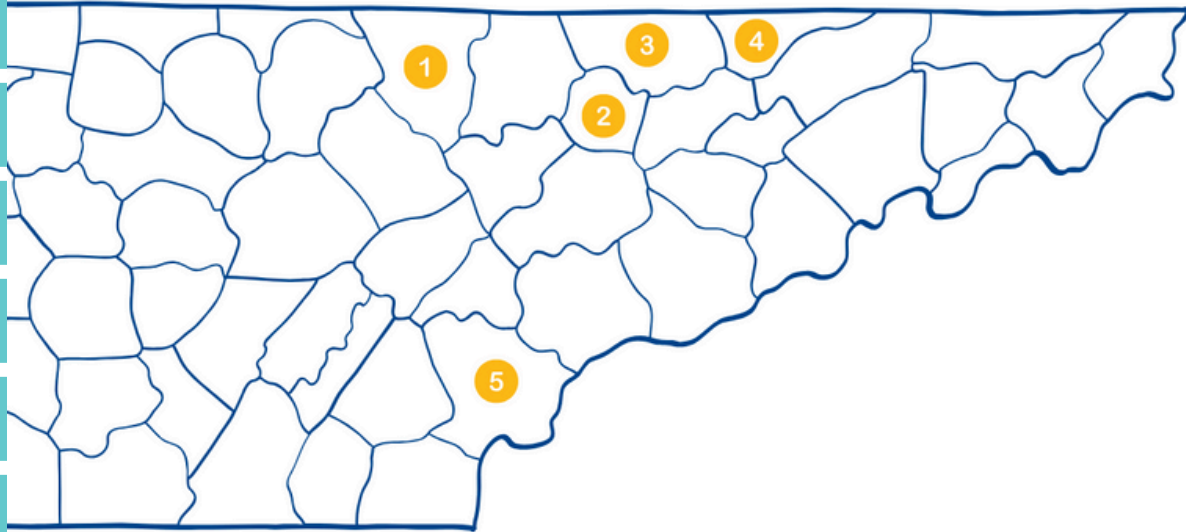
BY THE NUMBERS



In 2024, ETHRA partnered with 16 schools and organizations in 5 counties to provide rural non-congregate summer meal service.

- 1 Scott
- 2 Union
- 3 Claiborne

- 4 Hancock
- 5 Monroe



What's Unique About ETHRA's Model

Community-Run, School-Based

ETHRA, a community-based organization, partners with local schools to prepare and serve summer meals. The schools serve as both a vendor and a summer meal site. Unlike top-down programs, ETHRA's success lies in letting each school handle their own operations - from registration to food production.

Flexible for Families

Families are able to travel to their local school of choice, often from the school that their children already attend.

Supportive of Schools

Through designated monitors, ETHRA provides training, technical assistance, and regular check-ins - but schools lead the effort.



HOW IT WORKS

ETHRA's non-congregate program starts well before summer.

JANUARY

Planning begins. ETHRA revisits a detailed checklist that guides every logistical step. Letters go out to every school system in their service area, inviting them to partner.

FEBRUARY - MARCH

Responses roll in—typically from returning schools ready to commit early. School nutrition departments sign on as partners and receive training to become SFSP-compliant vendors and summer meal sites. For counties where schools opt out, ETHRA builds partnerships with nonprofits or restaurants to fill gaps.

APRIL

Each participating school begins registering families. Children must be under 18 and living in the area.

MAY

Sites begin communicating with families and distributing car tags. Pick-up locations and schedules are confirmed.

JUNE - JULY

Meals are distributed weekly. Schools prep food, while ETHRA monitors quality, compliance, and communication between vendors and sites. If a family didn't register? No problem - on-site registration is always available.

Where schools didn't want to prepare but still wanted to distribute meals, ETHRA matched them with third-party vendors, offering meal delivery directly to the site. In counties where schools opt out, meals are also delivered to sites like Bible schools or community centers.

Meals Kids Actually Want to Eat

Each week, participating families receive boxes filled with nutritious and appealing food designed specifically with children in mind. Breakfast options include both hot and cold items like sausage biscuits and cereal, while lunch features familiar favorites such as chicken sandwiches and burritos. Meals are rounded out with fruits, vegetables, whole grains, snacks, and beverages like milk and juice. The menus rotate every two to three weeks and are thoughtfully developed by school nutrition teams to meet USDA guidelines while keeping kids excited to eat. “We don’t just want the food to be healthy—we want it to be fun,” said Stephens. “That’s how you make sure it gets eaten.”

CLAIBORNE COUNTY SCHOOLS

One partner, Claiborne County Schools, has seen the value firsthand.

“Working with ETHRA to provide summer meals for our children in the community has been a good experience,” said Melany Bunch, the district’s School Nutrition Director. “The ETHRA staff is very helpful in guiding you through the entire process to ensure all guidelines are met when serving kids. We look forward to partnering with them again this summer.”



Lessons Learned & Looking Forward

Launching non-congregate meals through school partners came with its share of challenges. First-time sites often required additional training and early support, and the first week of distribution brought high demand and logistical learning curves. Still, teams adapted quickly. In areas without participating schools, ETHRA worked with trusted community groups like local Boys & Girls Clubs to ensure no family was left out. Looking ahead to summer 2025, ETHRA plans to expand the availability of shelf-stable meals and pilot more off-campus partnerships to reach underserved families. “We’ve been doing this for 35 years, but we’re still learning,” said Stephens.

For Sponsors Looking to Start

For organizations considering launching a non-congregate summer meal program, ETHRA offers a few key takeaways. Start small, partnering with a handful of reliable schools before expanding. Support schools not just as meal distribution points, but as full program vendors—empowering them to manage registration, distribution, and community outreach. And above all, keep the process simple and relationship-driven. “This works because it’s local,” said Stephens. “We’re not reinventing anything. We’re just meeting families where they are—with people they already know.”



**The goal is to make it easier for schools—and
better for families.”**



The ETHRA Sunshine Bus is a mobile meal site that brings food and fun to kids with seating and tables for dining.

Learn more or partner with East Tennessee Human Resource Agency:

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