



How Local Food Policy Councils Can Strengthen Summer Meal Programs

Led by United Way of the Lakelands, the Greenwood Counts Community Consortium's (GC3) Food and Hunger Alliance, Greenwood's Local Food Policy Council, partnered with Greenwood School District 50 to expand access to summer meals across South Carolina's Lakelands region. This case study examines a practical example of how Summer Meal Sponsors nationwide can leverage Local Food Policy Councils (LFPCs) as strategic partners to enhance their summer meal programs.

Food insecurity remains a persistent challenge across the United States, particularly in rural communities during the summer months when school meals are unavailable. South Carolina faces an especially high need, ranking seventh highest nationally for food insecurity. Within the state, **Greenwood County**, part of the Lakelands region, ranks 16th highest among South Carolina's 46 counties.

In response to this growing need, the United Way of the Lakelands launched the **Greenwood Counts Community Consortium's (GC3) Food and Hunger Alliance** working group in 2021, formed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The working group later became an official **Local Food Policy Council (LFPC)** for the state of South Carolina. What began as a response to pandemic-era food shortages evolved into a coordinated, community-driven effort to strengthen the local food system and expand summer meal programming, particularly **non-congregate options** for families with children in rural areas who account for a large majority of the state.

Through its collaboration with the Greenwood School District 50, the GC3 Food and Hunger Alliance demonstrates how Local Food Policy Councils can play a critical role in strengthening summer meal programs, ultimately expanding access for children and families during the summer months.

What is a Local Food Policy Council?

A Local Food Policy Council (LFPC) is a community-based coalition that brings together residents, organizations, and institutions from across sectors to build a more just, sustainable, and equitable food system. Councils typically serve a county or region and work to strengthen how food is produced, distributed, and accessed by aligning partners, elevating community voice, and influencing policy and practice.

Because food systems affect health, economic stability, and community well-being, LFPCs are intentionally cross-sector and may include representatives from public health, agriculture, government, nonprofits, faith communities, and community members with lived experience. By coordinating existing efforts rather than creating new ones, LFPCs help communities respond more effectively to local needs.

This coordinating role makes LFPCs especially valuable in expanding summer meal programs. By identifying gaps, supporting sponsors and host sites, aligning outreach, and mobilizing volunteers, councils can help ensure families, particularly in rural areas, can access meals when school is out.



A connector, advisor, and driver of community-led solutions. It brings together local leaders, organizations, and residents to mobilize what already exists and fill in what doesn't.

Justo Chalaire, United Way of the Lakelands



Center community voice
to co-create solutions that
advance equitable food access



Convene stakeholders
to better understand how local
food systems are interconnected



Educate communities
and decision makers about food
insecurity and challenges



Support programs and policy
that strengthen local food systems
and create sustainable impact



Connect partners
to align efforts and reduce
duplication across initiatives

Understanding Food Insecurity in Greenwood County

Led by the United Way of the Lakelands' Justo Chalaire, Director of Community Impact and Evaluation, GC3 began its work by listening to the community. Through surveys and listening sessions, the alliance learned that food insecurity in Greenwood County is driven by more than food availability alone. Barriers included high costs, limited transportation, lack of awareness, and restricted access to healthy options, with the greatest challenges faced by rural families and Hispanic residents facing language barriers.

These challenges intensify during the summer months, when school closures cut off a critical source of daily meals for children and rural geography makes traditional congregate feeding sites difficult to access. "Those conversations helped us understand why non-congregate summer meals, options that allow families to pick up food and take it home, were so important for Greenwood," said Chalaire.

The alliance translated these insights into action. United Way, with LFPC support, developed an interactive [**Greenwood County Food Resource Map**](#), a real-time, mobile-accessible digital tool showing summer meal locations, food pantries, and benefits enrollment assistance.

Additionally, the alliance connected with the University of South Carolina's state-level local food policy network, becoming an officially recognized LFPC and gaining access to technical assistance and statewide support.

Supporting Summer Meals in Greenwood 50

Greenwood School District 50 has long operated summer meal programs to support children when school is out, but like many rural districts, expanding access, especially through non-congregate models, required additional coordination, outreach, and hands-on support.

GC3 invited Amy Stabler, Greenwood 50's School Nutrition Director, to share existing summer meal plans, identify gaps, and outline needed support. "They invited me to come in and talk about where we were already distributing meals and where the needs were," Stabler explained. "That conversation really helped shine a light on areas that weren't being served."





The Greenwood County Resource Map was updated to clearly show where summer meals were available and where gaps remained. “They did a really good job of building a map of our county to show what areas were getting help and where the need was,” Stabler said. “That made it easier to reach out to churches and community partners in the places that needed it most.”

The alliance also coordinated community communication, sharing posters, flyers, and sign-up information across partner networks, ensuring families knew how to access meals.

Volunteer support was critical. Weekly pickup days required significant labor to move and distribute meals efficiently. “You never know what to expect on pickup days,” Stabler said. “We were passing out around 10,000 meals every Thursday, and you need a lot of hands on deck to keep those car lines moving. You can plan everything, but without volunteers, none of it works. The alliance sent volunteers every time we asked.”

The alliance also helped Greenwood 50 navigate new relationships with potential partners. “There are a lot of churches that want to take on projects like this,” Stabler noted. “Having a coalition that invites them in makes all the difference.”

Key Highlights of Greenwood LFPC’s Impact on Summer Meals



Coordinated planning

by creating space for school nutrition leaders to share needs, align timelines, and build relationships



Identified service gaps

by mapping summer meal sites against community need, helping Greenwood 50 reach rural and underserved areas missed by traditional planning



Mobilized volunteers

to support high-volume non-congregate meal distributions, ensuring efficient, safe weekly pickups for thousands of families

What This Means for Your Community

Summer Meal Sponsors across the country can strengthen their programs by partnering with Local Food Policy Councils. “When school districts and sponsors are doing the heavy lifting, councils can step in to help with coordination, communication, and community trust,” says Justo Chalaire. “That’s especially important in rural areas, where non-congregate models depend on strong partnerships to reach families where they are.”

Practical Steps for Summer Meal Sponsors

- **Find a Local Food Policy Council in your area:**
[Food Policy Council Map](#)
- **Partner early with your council** to identify gaps, align timelines, and coordinate outreach before summer begins. GC3's monthly summer meal planning meetings began in March.
- **Engage councils to identify rural or underserved areas** that may be missed by traditional site planning.
- **Share your program needs clearly**, including site locations, volunteer support, distribution days, and communication gaps.
- **Host a summer meal planning meeting** in collaboration with your council. Invite elected officials, meal sponsors, current and potential site partners to coordinate logistics, align schedules, identify service gaps, recruit sites, and share resources.
- **Use councils to expand reach beyond school channels**, tapping into community organizations, faith groups, and local networks. Request volunteer coordination support for high-volume pickup days or mobile distributions.
- **Collaborate on outreach materials** (flyers, posters, social media) to increase participation and reduce confusion
- **Document impact together** using photos, participation data, and stories to support future funding and sustainability



The Greenwood experience demonstrates that Local Food Policy Councils are uniquely positioned to connect partners, leverage community knowledge, and build sustainable food access solutions, especially during the summer months when children are most at risk of hunger. By providing coordination, communication, data tools, volunteer support, and policy guidance, LFPCs can dramatically expand access to summer meals, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Communities across the country can replicate this model, proving that when local leaders, residents, schools, and nonprofits work together, no child should go hungry during the summer.