



# BUILDING & MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR STATE AGENCY - A GUIDE FOR PROGRAM SPONSORS

State agencies and program sponsors are ultimately on the same team working towards the same goal-- feeding kids! A program sponsor's greatest partner is their state agency. Building and maintaining a positive relationship with your state agency can support and improve your program and help your state agency develop better resources and processes to support sponsors.

## Strong Relationships Benefit Both Program Sponsors and State Agencies

Benefits to Program Sponsors	Benefits to State Agencies
A better understanding of the state agency's role in programs	A better understanding of how programs are being implemented in their state
Potential to receive more effective technical assistance	Potential to offer more tailored and effective technical assistance
Support to implement new ideas and models	Improved and compliant programs
For both: Improved communication facilitating dynamic and open sharing of information between sponsor and state agency.	

## Strategies to Build Strong Relationships

### Be Proactive

- **Ask your state agency for training resources and support.** Reaching out to your state agency will demonstrate your interest and commitment and help you increase your program knowledge and expertise.
- **Before trying something new, check in with your state agency.** State agencies can be great planning partners when looking to start a new initiative or change programming. By working with your state agency, you can ensure any program changes comply with federal and state rules and regulations before the change is implemented.

### ***Be Proactive (continued)***

- **Look for relationship-building opportunities with your state agency contact and the agency broadly.** Be sure to look across your organization for where you might be working with other state agency departments like the after care licensing division. This can be an excellent opportunity to coordinate efforts.
- **Keep the state agency up to date on program changes.** Be sure to follow the requested procedures for updating key application information, notifying them about field trips, changes in service times, etc.

### ***Foster Understanding***

- **Invite your state agency for a site visit or special event (separate from required site monitoring or auditing).** Your state agency may appreciate the opportunity to learn more about you and your program outside of required visitations, where the focus is on program regulations and compliance. If travel is not feasible, consider offering a virtual option or seek out times when your contact is in your area.
- **Take time to learn your state agency contact(s).** Learn your contact's preferred method of communication, and don't hesitate to reach out to them. They are there to support you and answer your questions. Most state agency staff prefer answering questions rather than communicating a deficiency, violation, or process error. You may have a different contact depending on the topic or request. So, learning the right person to reach out to for specific needs can become important.
- **Learn what matters most to your state agency.** There are many reasons why child nutrition programs are important. From decreasing food insecurity to improving nutrition, your state agency might prioritize one factor over another. By learning what is important to your state agency, you can build understanding and illustrate how your program can support that goal.
- **Share your desired outcomes, and be clear on your program goals.** By being transparent about your program goals and intentions, your state agency will be better able to help you develop a plan to achieve your and their goals.
- **Ask questions respectfully.** There can be different ways to interpret federal regulations and guidance, so it is fair to raise questions about a requirement, but do so in a way that shows you value the state's perspective and want to partner in getting to the best answer possible. Keep in mind that they must answer to USDA for program compliance.

### ***Build & Sustain Momentum***

- **Be patient.** Building relationships takes time.
- **Stay regular with your communications.** Regularity will foster improved communication and familiarity, supporting a long-term working relationship.



### **One Big Tip**

Be compliant. Follow all regulations and state procedures. Reach out promptly if you have questions or run into challenges. Your state agency can be your biggest help in resolving uncertainties or correcting issues with technical assistance, guidance, and support.



***Don't forget to share this resource with a friend or coworker! Find additional resources and learn more about improving your nutrition programs at [bestpractices.nokidhungry.org](https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org).***