



Innovations in Child Nutrition Programs During COVID-19 and Beyond

Introduction

When the pandemic forced schools to close this past spring, everything changed. Students and teachers were thrust into online learning, parents found themselves responsible for around-the-clock care, and meal providers were asked to invent plans that would connect kids with food at home. Everyone was unprepared and overwhelmed, and yet many meal providers found themselves rapidly adapting their operations to reach kids in their communities. In some instances, these new models and programs really worked, sometimes better than before.

Meal providers found themselves facing even greater need than before the pandemic. Rising unemployment led some families to rely on programs for food who had never done so before, and meal providers became more acquainted with families' needs beyond food, ranging from household products to lack of childcare to an inability to pay rent. Meanwhile, USDA issued waivers that allowed meal providers to distribute food in new ways, such as allowing parents to pick up meals to take home and serving multiple meals at one time. Increased demand, awareness of families' needs, and program flexibilities inspired the individuals and organizations featured here to make program changes that ultimately benefitted the kids and families they serve.

We wanted to learn more about these crisis-inspired innovations. In a national survey of schools and other organizations, we asked those providing meals to kids to share their innovative practices or ideas. We then reached out to some of these meal providers, as well as some of the recipients of No Kid Hungry emergency grants, to learn more about their ideas. This report showcases their most creative tactics, illustrated by case studies that were informed by these interviews. We were impressed by what we heard, and we hope the work featured here inspires others to bring their own ideas and programmatic improvements to life.

Innovative ideas fell broadly into five categories:



Innovations in Meals Served: Most meal providers serve only breakfast and lunch. This section looks at how meal providers can connect kids and their families with additional meals.



Innovations in Outreach: Outreach with meal programs is often a challenge. This section features stories from meal providers that took a “no family left behind” approach, often going the extra mile to ensure that all families knew how to access meals.



Innovations in Delivery: Many meal providers, especially in more rural areas, experimented with meal delivery at the start of the pandemic. This section focuses on how to make delivery sustainable for the long-term.



Innovations in Partnerships: With new demand and constraints on capacity, some meal providers turned to new partners to support meal production. This section details how restaurants can support providers with meal service.



Innovations Beyond Food: The pandemic made meal providers even more aware of the myriad challenges families face. This section details how some are doing even more to support the families they are already reaching with food.



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1 Innovations in Meals Served

In our survey of meal providers, many respondents described knowing that some families needed more food than what they were able to provide. Because most programs serve only breakfast and lunch, some meal providers said that families needed dinner, weekend meals, or more fruits and vegetables. Many of the meal providers who are only reimbursed for meals served to children expressed that adults in the household also need food.

Knowing that the pandemic exacerbated food needs for some families, some meal providers felt compelled to find inventive ways to meet those additional needs. For some, the concepts were new, inspired by what they were hearing from families. For others, they were things they had always wanted to try that seemed even more important. Ideas ranged from providing weekend meals to helping families sign up for federal benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

This section features three stories. While each provider takes a different approach, each finds a way to help families access the additional food they need.

BOLD IDEA

Cash-like Assistance

DOLLARS DISTRIBUTED

\$87,000

ORGANIZATION

Student Support Network

LOCATION

Baltimore County, Maryland

Laurie Taylor-Mitchell, the Founder and President of Student Support Network, knows the importance of trying to understand families’ barriers to accessing programs. “Before the pandemic, we ran programs in ten schools in partnership with Baltimore County Public Schools. Our programs were in-house. We always have a pantry that has food and personal care items, and with anything else,

the schools call us with their needs,” said Taylor-Mitchell. When the pandemic forced their ten schools to close, Taylor-Mitchell knew she needed a new way to connect kids with food.

She developed a new approach: food distribution sites for families with access to transportation and for everyone else referred to the program, gift cards. Why cash like assistance? “Some families do not have cars. They do not have any way to get to a site. Sometimes public transportation is bad or some are afraid to use it. Families cannot get to distribution sites and their need is extreme...There are so many students and families that are just stranded,” explained Taylor-Mitchell. For these families, grocery gift cards can be a game changer because they can be mailed directly.

During a global pandemic, Taylor-Mitchell thinks the approach is especially advantageous. She further explained, “Mailing them is a great way to minimize personal contact. Our volunteers do not have to go out and shop for items, and risk exposure or transmission. It eliminated the personal contact.” The approach also gives families control over what they purchase. “They can buy other non-food essentials. They might need diapers, period products or soap and that is okay,” she continued. “Those needs are so pressing. Sometimes families prioritize diapers over food.” Taylor-Mitchell relies on grants, donations, and a robust tracking system to make the approach work, but no matter what schools do throughout the fall, this is something she wants to continue. “This pandemic has shown us that it would be highly desirable if we could keep mailing grocery gift cards. We know that need is not going to go away...We know that those crisis situations will be ongoing,” she concluded.



BOLD IDEA

**Three meals a day
for everyone**

ORGANIZATION

**Central Arkansas
Library System**

MEALS SERVED

135,000

LOCATION

Little Rock, Arkansas

Connecting kids with food isn't new for the Central Arkansas Library System. Kay Kay DeRossette, Be Mighty project coordinator for the library system, explained that historically, they served breakfast and lunch at ten of their fifteen branches during the summer. When the pandemic hit, they grew their efforts. "The minute we heard schools were closed, the mayor called a group of stakeholders together to start planning. One of our biggest goals was to have full coverage for meals in the city," explained DeRossetta. Their expanded focus translated into new offerings. In addition to breakfast and lunch, the libraries started serving supper and adult meals.



Supper was important for the city because, as DeRossette explained, "We knew that people might be working during the day and not be able to pick up lunches." And when a funder agreed to cover costs, serving adults was a no-brainer. "We have adult meals at all of our sites for breakfast, lunch, and supper...I think it improves our participation when we're able to provide a meal for not only the kids, but the whole family. Families can save the money they would have used to purchase food for other things like health care or housing," she continued. Serving three meals a day to anyone who walks through their doors isn't easy, but for DeRossette it is necessary. Looking back, she stated simply, "Coronavirus has really pushed us. This is what we need to do. It was important to just do it."

BOLD IDEA**Frozen meals****MEALS SERVED****120,000****ORGANIZATION****St. Mary's Food Bank****LOCATION****Phoenix, Arizona**

St. Mary's Food Bank has experience transforming challenges into opportunities. "We have a huge footprint in the state," said Laura Brill, director of child nutrition. "We're here in Phoenix. We also distribute all the way up in the far northeast and northwest corners. It is a six-hour drive and there is no way a driver can do it in one day," she continued. When Brill and her team sat down four years ago to think about summer meals, they knew that the drive itself prevented program expansion.

"We could not deliver meals every day. But when we looked at our menu, we saw that quite a few of the items we served came frozen and individually packaged. We decided that if we could do enough meals with frozen or shelf-stable components, that might be something we could offer rural communities," explained Brill. Her team got to work, quickly developing a menu and plan to test the idea out. New sites received a freezer and cooler on loan and a delivery of meals every other week. The sites followed the menu, defrosting meals served the night before in order to serve on-site the next day. At summer's end, the pilot was deemed a huge success, paving the way for what is now an established program for the food bank: "Freeze and Thaw."



During the pandemic, the model has helped St. Mary's reach pockets of the population that otherwise may have been missed. "We position ourselves where there are gaps," said Brill. And, new waivers issued by USDA that allow families to take multiple meals home to be eaten at whenever families please may have created the perfect storm to increase participation. She went on to explain, "Freeze and Thaw has worked very well, especially this summer. Our rural sites that do grab-and-go and multiple meals are seeing triple-digit increases. I think you need both for rural sites." While Freeze and Thaw was not new for the food bank, letting families take multiple meals home, to be eaten at home was and, for some, the flexibility of a frozen meal is preferable. When multiple meals can be taken home and eaten later it seems like more families are willing to make the drive into town to pick up meals. Brill detailed that the approach provides families with even more flexibility, stating, "The meals are designed to be eaten cold, but when they can take them home, they can do whatever they want." Now families can warm meals up and customize them however they wish.

2 Innovations in Outreach

Promoting meal programs can be challenging. Many families that do not participate in meal programs don't actually know they exist. Many survey respondents cited the need for better outreach tools to be more successful.

Meal providers may feel like they could never put out enough posters, yard signs, newspaper ads, or public service announcements. And maybe they can't. When the pandemic hit, some providers turned their attention away from advertising and refocused their efforts on interactive, two-way communication. Sometimes this was face-to-face conversations, and sometimes technology was employed to streamline efforts. No matter the medium, some of the most successful outreach came back to developing a sense of mutual understanding, sharing critical information, and building trust.

The three sponsors showcased know that families need more information than when and where meals are served if they're going to show up. Here we hear from a small, rural nonprofit about building new relationships and two school districts that have successfully used technology to help with outreach.

BOLD IDEA**Teen Site Supervisors****FAMILIES ENGAGED****600****ORGANIZATION****Kids at Their Best****LOCATION****Morgan County, Colorado**

For Jodi Walker, the executive director at Kids at Their Best, a successful summer meals program isn't all about the food, but also about community. Kids at Their Best has a long history of working in partnership with the community. Walker runs parent programs during the year and hires local teens to manage her meal sites in the summer. The work allows her to keep the conversation about summer meals active all year and utilize grassroots communication as her primary outreach strategy.

With so much uncertainty related to the pandemic, Walker made a promise to the families and teens she has long worked with: she would continue to serve meals in the summer – no matter what. “I needed to give them some kind of stability in the midst of all the craziness,” she emphasized. With the decision made, she got to work selecting site locations and hiring teens. As she made her hires, she worked to employ teens that speak the same language of the families who are likely to attend the program. “We could hire translators, but when we hire from within that community, we find people that have some of those trusting relationships that we can expand on,” she explained. That trust matters to Walker all the time, but she thinks it is especially important during the current crisis. She stated, “Even now, if you are poor and hungry and you do not trust the place that has the food, you will continue to be hungry.”

While her tactics may be atypical, Jodi has seen the approach work. When she started her program ten years ago, she served meals to just two families, this summer she served six hundred. For it to work, Walker stressed that your approach must be authentic. “If you don't really want to meet your neighbors and connect with your community, it isn't going to work well,” she emphasized. “But, if you can get one kid, or one mom, or one family that is willing to try your program, then they are going to tell their family, their friends and it just ripples.”

BOLD IDEA

Weekly Input

SURVEY FREQUENCY

750 families surveyed weekly

ORGANIZATION

Williamsburg Community School District

LOCATION

Williamsburg, Iowa

Becky Risdon, the food service director at Williamsburg Community School District, had a hunch that the rest of the year might look different when students returned in the spring. “We decided we needed to be proactive and started doing everything we could to prevent an outbreak. I thought we were being overly cautious – turns out we weren’t,” she stated. They changed policies and procedures, increased sanitization, and came up with new ways to get food on plates, but just like most districts, they were eventually forced to close their doors.

When schools closed in March, the superintendent sent out a survey to see if families would need meals delivered, asking how many kids they have and how they would prefer to get the meals. They learned that a third of their families could make the trip to and from school on a regular basis, but the other two-thirds needed the school to deliver. Without that data, the district knew some families could have been missed. With a system for surveying families already in place, Risdon thought it made sense to survey families more consistently. Now, a similar survey that asks questions about the number of meals needed and delivery preferences goes out to everyone in the district weekly.

Risdon and her staff also call families that do not complete the survey to ensure that regardless of individual circumstances, all families have access to the same information. “There will always be families that need some additional support. In those instances, we called those families and asked them the same question,” she said. For Risdon, the additional work is worth it. She concluded, “It is so helpful to have that information every week and really know. We know we won’t have waste. We know how many meals to put on each bus every week. And, for our families, it is all about getting them the resources needed.”

BOLD IDEA**Tell Your Story****MEALS SERVED****114,000****ORGANIZATION****Valparaiso Community
School District****LOCATION****Valparaiso, Indiana**

Valparaiso Community School District has always served summer meals, but this summer was unlike anything before. “We typically operate the summer food service program at five smaller sites and end up serving 20,000 meals. This has been totally different. We’re up to 100,000 meals and we only have the one site,” stated Kathy Kane, director of school nutrition. While need likely increased when schools and businesses closed, Kane also made two changes that might also help explain the sizable increase. First, caregivers know what to expect because Kane started sharing more about her program and the food she serves on social media. Second, she started serving weekly “take and bake” meal kits. She explains, “We were doing daily grab-and-go out of the middle school parking lot. Then, we switched to the weekly meal kits. That was all it took. Parents came out in record numbers and cars were backed up for miles.”



Kane took to social media to inform parents of program changes, but she didn't stop there. She revealed, "We spotlight what we're serving on social media. We don't want there to be any stigma. I wanted people to be excited. This is food for anybody." Meal kits come with preparation instructions so families can cook together. Through her posts, Kane can correct some misconceptions parents might have about school meals, build excitement about the menu, and showcase the important work her team does.

While social media manager may be a new addition to Kane's job description, her approach is working. Since the start of the pandemic she has doubled her followers and people are paying attention. When pressed to explain her success she joked, "I am no digital native. You just have to teach yourself and figure it out. Google is there to help you. You just cannot be afraid of new things. You have to be willing to learn."

3 Innovations in Delivery

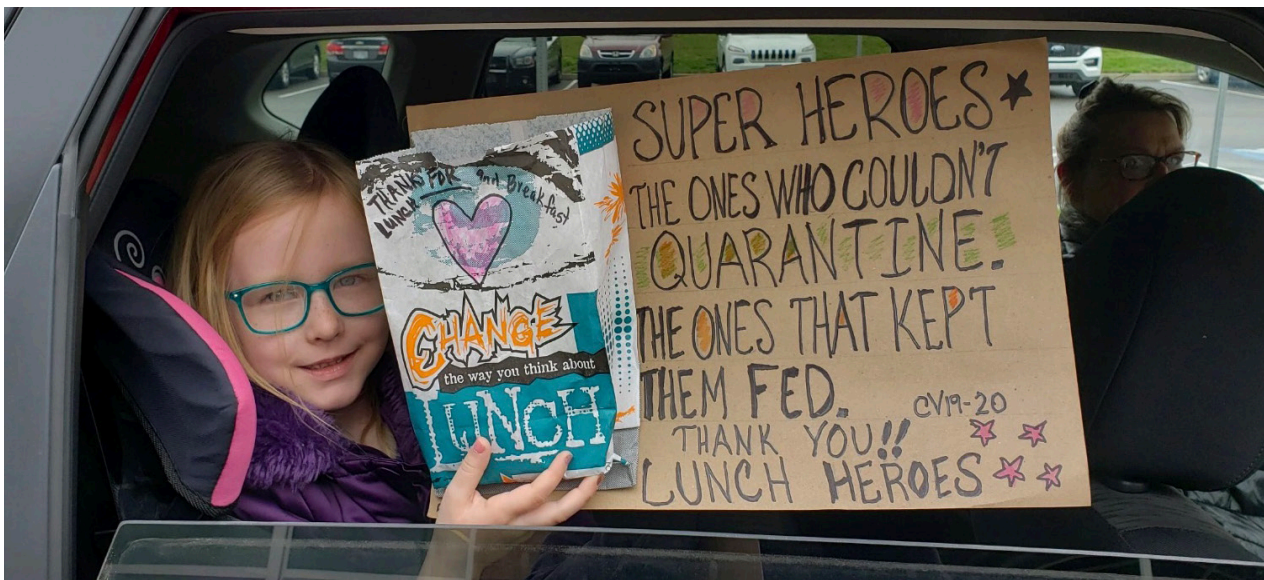
There are many reasons why some families are not be able to pick up meals every day from a distribution site. Transportation may be an issue, or the costs associated with a drive into town might not make the trip worth it. Amidst a pandemic, picking up meals is even more complicated. Families may want to decrease their risk of exposure by staying inside as much as possible.

Meal providers know these challenges exist and over the summer many experimented with meal delivery as a potential solution. Delivering meals daily can be revolutionary for families, but some providers found that the work was harder to sustain than expected. The model is time consuming and resource intensive. This section features three examples of those who made it work. We'll hear from two school districts and one food bank.

BOLD IDEA**Redeploying Staff****MEALS SERVED****225,000****ORGANIZATION****Carrolton Exempted Village
School District****LOCATION****Carrolton, Ohio**

With just under 2,000 students, Carrolton Exempted Village School District is small. “We’re a very rural community and high poverty...we’re thirty minutes from everywhere,” explained Dr. Dave Quattrochi, superintendent for the district.

When the pandemic made its way to Ohio, the district made feeding kids a priority. They set up a distribution point at the single elementary school in town but knew that many families would not be able to make the daily drive to school to pick up meals. So, they went mobile. “We sent out eight school buses into the community in case someone could not come to the main site. Each bus had a bus driver, a cook, an aid, and an administrator,” explained Barbara Burns, school nutrition director. With kids no longer being physically in school, some





school staff had time for other things. The school district redeployed staff to support its school food program and, through the school food program, also found ways to meet other needs of families. Burns described, “Not only did this turn into food distribution. We were passing out iPads, collecting homework. We became everything. If something needed to be done, we just did it during the distribution. We became the glue that held everything together for the school.”

While staff were not required to support meal distribution, many wanted to. “Everyone wanted to help. It wasn’t like I had to convince people,” Burns explained. For her, convincing people to lend a hand was all about giving people meaningful work to do. “People want to feel needed,” she made clear. “When you reach out and let people share their expertise, they take ownership. They want to make it happen.”

With this additional support, the district delivered 600 meals to 200 families each week throughout the summer and they have plans to continue delivery as needed this fall.

BOLD IDEA**Meal Kits****PARTICIPATION GROWTH****60%****ORGANIZATION****Champaign Community
Unit 4 School District****LOCATION****Champaign, Illinois**

Laura Dees, the director of food services at Champaign Community Unit 4 School District, had two goals in mind when she sat down to reimagine how she might serve students meals in a world where learning takes place exclusively online: 1) keep everyone safe and 2) make meal pick up as easy as possible. “We wanted to minimize exposure,” Dees explained. For her, that meant avoiding models dependent on daily preparation and pick-up.

Meal kits, where families received ingredients to prepare meals at home, seemed like the perfect solution. “For families, many do not have reliable transportation. It is easier to get multiple meals when you do not know what the day-to-day is going to look like,” explained Dees. When USDA issued waivers changing what was allowable, not only was the model easier for her families and staff, it was also reimbursable. Dees and her team started slow, building out the model over time. Now, the kits include a combination of dry food, cold food, and freezer items that are equivalent to five breakfasts and five lunches, all paired with cooking instructions.

When they first introduced meal kits, families picked their kits up from central locations. But Dees and her team tweaked the model when they realized kids were often the ones picking up food. “The little kids could not carry them,” said Dees. So, they started doing neighborhood-based distributions. They used participation data from earlier on in the summer to set up mobile sites closer to where pockets of kids live and play. She further explained, “I have always wanted to go mobile and now we can see where we need to go.” For Dees and her community, the approach works – participation is up 60%.

BOLD IDEA

Iterating on Established Partnerships

ORGANIZATION

FIND Food Bank

HOUSEHOLDS DELIVERED TO

500

LOCATION

Indio, California

The pandemic came with new challenges for FIND Food Bank. Food insecurity surged, but with households unable or afraid to make the trip to pick up food, they needed a new way to meet the growing need. “People were very concerned about becoming sick when leaving their home or just were not getting access to food because their support network had decreased,” explained Lorena Marroquin, director of community impact. With a volunteer base built on retirees, their capacity to add new service models was severely limited. Determined to do more, the FIND Food Bank team got creative, reaching out to old partners with new ideas.

FIND started by reaching out to the local health care system, knowing that they already had plans to visit homebound clients. Marroquin explained, “That partnership just came naturally. We helped them bring on new clients and they helped us by distributing the food.” In this arrangement, staff from the health care system pick up produce and shelf stable items from the food bank and then deliver it directly to over 200 households. But still, that wasn’t enough. “We noticed that we were not reaching everyone, and our programs were at capacity,” stated Marroquin. So, FIND made another call, this time to a local limousine company. She went on to explain that workers from the limousine company had been volunteering in their warehouse once a month to pack before the pandemic. “We reached out and asked if they would be willing to deliver food. They wanted to keep their staff employed and now they help us three days a week,” Marroquin stated. Together, they are delivering food to an additional 300 households a month. Marroquin knows she needs strong partners to make direct delivery work. But, in some ways coronavirus has made her hopeful about what might be possible. “Reach out. It never hurts to ask,” she encouraged.

4 Innovations in Partnerships

When schools closed their doors and businesses shut down, food needs for families increased in many communities. For meal providers, new demand came with a new set of challenges. Some meal providers found that simply sourcing enough food was difficult. Those that had enough food often still worried about the capacity of their teams and their kitchens.

To address these challenges, some meal providers formed unique partnerships with restaurants. In some cases, restaurants were willing and able to donate unused product. In others, they stepped in to source product and help prepare meals – eager to find creative ways to put their staff back to work. While restaurants are only one type of partner some turned to, this partnership is unique in the way that it supported local establishments while simultaneously helping meal providers ensure they were able to meet demand.

Here we hear from three organizations – a school that leaned on local restaurants for vended meals, a nonprofit who looked to the community to fund their new efforts, and a foundation who connected partners across the county with restaurant meals. We've seen dozens of successful chef and restaurant-driven meal programs launched during the pandemic and these examples only scratch the surface.



BOLD IDEA

New Ways to Make Meals

MEALS SERVED

695,000

ORGANIZATION

Fullerton School District

LOCATION

Fullerton, California

When the pandemic hit, Michael Burns, the director of nutrition services for Fullerton School District, quadrupled the number of sites at which he typically serves meals. “During summers we serve meals at the schools that offer enrichment. That is typically four or five sites. We’d prepare meals at our central kitchen, one hot and one cold, and send that out to the school sites,” explained Burns. Now, they’re serving kids curbside at 20 sites.

With growth came operational challenges. Burns revealed, “There was huge fear about coronavirus and coming to work.” The size of the central kitchen exacerbated those concerns. They needed more staff in the kitchen to prepare more meals, but the central kitchen was too small to allow the number of staff needed to properly social distance. Burns continued, “Because of our concerns about the central kitchen we had to come up with innovative ways to ensure that the central kitchen was not producing all of these meals. It was causing overcrowding.”

Burns and his team identified two new ways to prepare meals that would minimize space constraints while simultaneously benefitting their community: BBQs where food would be grilled on-site and partnering with restaurants where meals would be prepared and delivered. “We prepare about one-third of meals in the central kitchen, one-third are made by local restaurants, and one-third are prepared at the BBQs,” stated Burns. To make the model work Burns stressed the importance of working with his district and keeping community front of mind. His district kicked in extra funds to cover a portion of the new costs and the local Chamber of Commerce helped identify locally owned restaurants with which to partner. “I would do it again,” stated Burns. “The kids eating something different, having partnerships, the community relationships we’re developing. Hard work pays off and everyone really appreciates what we’re doing. It makes it all worthwhile.”

BOLD IDEA

Community Sponsored Family Meals

ORGANIZATION

Lumpkin County Family Connection

AMOUNT SPONSORED

\$8,000

LOCATION

Dahlonega, Georgia

Program regulations can make it feel impossible for providers to meet the needs of an entire family. Many sponsors want to do more, but without increased federal support, they are left wondering how they can afford to meet the food needs of the whole family. When Brigitte Barker, the executive director at Lumpkin County Family Connection, found herself asking that question this March, she knew it was time to get creative.

Rather than raise money to prepare meals herself, Barker used grant funds to purchase gift cards that families could use at local restaurants. “It was really just started out of desperation,” she mused. What seemed like a last-ditch effort was quickly validated as a good idea, and her community wanted in. Barker revealed, “We keep hearing that people wanted to help. When they heard what we were doing, they started calling the restaurants and asking how they could do more. So, I said yeah, if they want to sponsor a meal, they can just call me. We tried it and it just blew up.” Looking back, Barker knows the program was a win-win. By working with local restaurants that were hurting most, when community members sponsored a meal for a family, they knew they were giving back in more ways than one. Throughout the duration of the program, countless individuals contributed to the program, which translated into 90 meals for local families.



BOLD IDEA

Making Connections

MEALS SERVED

1,500,000

ORGANIZATION

4Roots

LOCATION

Orlando, Florida

4Roots isn't your typical meal provider. They're not a school, a foodbank, or even a restaurant. They're a foundation and while their work distributing meals is new, their interest in food insecurity isn't. Rebecca Marshall, program director at 4Roots explained, "We had been exploring solutions to address food insecurity in our community for a while. When coronavirus happened, we had to think about what we could do right now." Their first step was listening. They reached out to partners and asked what they were hearing and how 4Roots might be able to help.

Their long-term partner, Orange County Public Schools, answered with a clear call to action: find a way to produce more meals for students. 4Roots turned to its network to identify a local restaurant that could produce meals and then partnered with the district to support distribution. "We worked with



Orange County Public Schools on existing sites and activating new sites in neighborhoods that needed meals the most. In some cases, we dropped off meals, and in some cases, our team served the meals,” revealed Marshall. Once on-site, they saw adults who were taking hours out of their day to pick up meals for kids only to leave with no food for themselves.

“We thought, ‘Hey, we need to get these adults and caregivers meals as well,’” said campaign development manager, Betsy Sorg. “You can’t wait for the funding, you just have to start feeding people.” As the program expanded, 4Roots started to work with churches and local organizations to provide additional meals for the community. But, schools are still one of their main partners. Marshall went on to explain, “We found synergy in working with schools. It is a one stop shop... Families can pick up student meals and then stop at our tent at the end of the line to pick up their adult meals and a bag of produce.” Access to adult meals and produce ensures that when an adult stops by to pick up meals for their kids, they leave knowing that their needs for the week will also be met. 4Roots has plans to continue their work focused on adults and while they are not sure what will come next, they do know their program works and is sustainable. As their program gained traction serving families, they also gained traction with new funders interested in sponsoring meal sites in the communities closest to them.

5 Innovations Beyond Food

When we asked meal providers what is keeping them up at night shortly after schools went virtual, many expressed concerns about the social and emotional needs of the kids they serve. Some expressed concerns about safety and neglect, others worried about kids that might not be equipped to learn at home, and others were concerned about kids’ lack of physical activity and social interaction. While feeding kids is the primary job of meal providers, the current crisis led many of them to ask themselves how they could address families’ other needs at the same time as they were feeding kids.

Here we hear from three organizations that came up with some answers to that question. Two of the organizations featured found that food can be used as an entry point to provide additional services and the other found that space once dedicated to meal programs could be repurposed to meet a growing community need.

BOLD IDEA

Porch Visits

STUDENTS REACHED

815

ORGANIZATION

Pleasants County Schools

LOCATION

**Pleasants County,
West Virginia**

Amanda Mote, the social services, attendance and child nutrition director at Pleasants County Schools describes her community as “small-town USA.” With only one high school for the county, distance to and from school has always been an issue. For some students, this makes just getting to school tough. In traditional academic years, Mote has relied on home visits to address severe instances of truancy. Now, it is a strategy she is using more widely, but with a new purpose and creative twist.

When the pandemic hit, Mote and her team went into child nutrition mode and quickly realized that meal deliveries could serve as an inroad to more regular contact with students. Mote revealed, “We needed to put eyeballs on the student, to ask how they were doing, and to see if there was anything else the family needed.” She quickly trained her team and a group of volunteers to conduct socially distant home visits, what she calls “the porch visit.” “We go out in teams of two, stay in our cars and kids come out. It is just taking a normal intervention and tweaking it to make it okay for the situation that we are in now,” she explained. “Sometimes we use homework as an excuse to come visit. Sometimes we say we were in the neighborhood and use food as an excuse,” Mote admitted. Often the approach helps families feel more comfortable with the visit and it ensures that a larger need is being met. And because meals served this summer could be eaten anywhere, every meal delivered was considered reimbursable.

Want to try something similar in your community? Mote advises contacting someone who has experience with home visiting and partnering with your school safety committee before developing new procedures and protocols. But most importantly she says, “Just do it...It is totally worth it to see a kiddo light up because they’re seeing you for the first time in two months. It is worth it to see the relief on the parent’s face because they have food in the house.”

BOLD IDEA**Community Learning Centers****STUDENTS REACHED****750****ORGANIZATION****Cheyenne River Youth Project****LOCATION****Eagle Butte, South Dakota**

Established in 1988, the Cheyenne River Youth Project was founded by the community, for the community. Throughout its history, the organization has made independence a point of pride and as Executive Director Julie Garreau explained, that autonomy allows greater flexibility. “We are not an affiliate of anyone. Tribes talk about sovereignty, and we are,” said Garreau. “We look at our community and we look at our programs and we go from there. What is really beautiful is that we can adapt to what our community needs.”

This flexibility proved important at the start of the pandemic. With two youth centers and multiple small businesses falling under its umbrella, the Cheyenne River Youth Project is accustomed to doing most work face-to-face. “Normally we would have afterschool activities and then as summer comes, we would do that. But we just had to shift everything,” explained Garreau. When the pandemic started, Garreau and her team turned their attention to connecting families with food, diapers, clothing, and anything else people might need through curbside distributions.

As time went on, Garreau and her team made plans for new ways they could meet needs exposed by the pandemic. In addition to the services already provided, increasing access to the internet was at the top of their list. They worked quickly to install new internet lines, connect kids with Chromebooks, and set up



socially distant workstations in one of their unused spaces. Garreau revealed, “We turned our gym into a giant learning center where everyone can practice social distancing.” They also sourced enough masks and hand sanitizer to ensure that everyone could follow recommended protocols. In the learning center, youth attend classes, workshops and camps taught by local and remote instructors – and teens use the space when working on courses.

While programs at the Cheyenne River Youth Project will likely look different for quite some time, Garreau stressed that no matter the situation, it is important to just try. Reflecting on the last six months she said, “It has been challenging, but it has also forced us to be creative and resourceful. It is hard to do everything without being in person, but we’re sure trying. That is the beautiful thing about my staff. They’re really trying.”



BOLD IDEA**Community Organizing****COMMUNITY MEMBERS REACHED****20****ORGANIZATION****Missoula Food Bank and
Community Center****LOCATION****Missoula, Montana**

The Missoula Food Bank and Community Center started dabbling in community organizing about 2 years ago to improve their programs. Crystal White Shield, director of community organizing and equity, explained that community organizing is all about surfacing needs and working with citizen leaders on potential solutions. “The end goal is to get the community to a better place, where they are stronger and able to advocate for themselves,” she continued.

Knowing that the pandemic was likely to impact some communities more adversely than others, the food bank made a big commitment to a small community just outside of Missoula, focusing most of their community organizing efforts there. They used food to start the conversation, delivering meals for anyone who wanted one, activities for kids, and other household products daily. White Shield pairs her work with the distributions and knows that in many ways, it helps make her job a little easier. She explained, “If it were not for these meals being handed out, I would have a hard time building relationships. That is how my conversations started.”

She continued on to explain, “While I am there, I am collecting data through conversations on how I can help their community and then working with them to build their own committee to advocate for what their community needs.” Through the conversations, she has surfaced a handful of pressing needs: access to more reliable internet, an easier way to get to and from town, and more immediately, haircuts. “Haircuts are important because it gives a person the confidence they need to start a new school year, or do an interview,” said White Shield. This August, they provided community members with a fresh, new look by bringing stylists and barbers on site. Community organizing starts when you listen and put your own assumptions aside. It would have been easy for the food bank to assume that food was enough, but when they took the time to ask important questions, they were able to meet an unexpected need by acting on the answers they heard.

Conclusion

From the beginning of the pandemic, meal providers have stepped up, ensuring that millions of kids continue to have access to the food and resources they need. As we start the school year with many kids still learning from home, it is critical that providers continue to explore new ways to reach these children. The examples shared in this report hopefully provide some inspiration.

In the following months, we will continue to explore ideas and strategies that we think are effective now, and have potential to be in the future. If you're able, we'd encourage you to do the same. This August, USDA announced the extension of several waivers through the end of the school year that may make it even easier for meal providers to experiment with new models. By allowing meal providers to operate Summer Food Service Program and the Seamless Summer Option, permitting meals to be served outside of group settings, and extending parent pick-up, it will be possible for providers to continue to operate direct delivery, serve supper and weekend meals, and try some of the other strategies described here.

Innovation is never easy and doing this work amidst a crisis is even harder. Throughout our conversations with meal providers we heard that while this is not the work they expected to do, it is the work that has to be done. Many are hopeful that the models tested now will pave the way for a better future where more kids and their families have access to healthy food. As Laura Brill, director of child nutrition at St. Mary's food bank who is currently experimenting with frozen meals stated, "Through tough times, growth is hard, but it causes us to stretch and come up with new ideas for the next generation. That is what we have to remember. Good things could come of this that will be the foundation of the next iteration of what we all do."



Thank You

We are grateful to the organizations that agreed to be interviewed for this report. The stories shared remind us that even in the darkest times, those committed to this work remain innovative and resilient in the face of new challenges. This report would not be possible without your willingness to share. Thank you for your openness and the work you do every day. Special thanks to:

- 4 Roots
- Campaign Community Unit 4 School District
- Carrolton Exempted Village School District
- Central Arkansas Library System
- Cheyenne River Youth Project
- Community Lunch Program for Kids
- Fare Start
- FIND Food Bank
- Fullerton School District
- Kids at Their Best
- Lumpkin County Family Connection
- Missoula Food Bank and Community Center
- Pleasants County School
- Rockport Elementary School
- St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance
- Student Support Network
- True Vine Pentecostal Church
- Valparaiso Community School District
- Williamsburg School District
- YMCA of Rapid City
- YMCA of Western North Carolina

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1030 15th St. NW Suite, 1100W
Washington, DC 20005

800-969-4767
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