

Porch Visits: Pairing Meal Delivery with Home Visits to Holistically Meet Families' Needs

Porch Visits is a No Kid Hungry pilot program that pairs meal delivery with home visits to holistically meet families' needs. The program began during COVID as a way to understand and address the challenges families experiencing economic insecurity faced with children home from school, but has turned out to be a highly successful model for meeting the needs of families, even as in-person learning has returned and the effects of the pandemic have waned. Through conversations and relationships developed during weekly visits, Porch Visitors are able to identify and respond to the needs of each family, providing one-on-one assistance in accessing supports from food and Wi-Fi to TANF and Medicaid.

One of the most successful pilots is in Page County, VA, where nearly 70 families currently have a Porch Visitor and the program is growing rapidly. Page County is a scenic tourism community nestled between the Blue Ridge and Massanutten Mountains. Amid the beauty there is also great disparity; the residents of the county have one of the lowest incomes in the state of Virginia. More than 60% of the school division's students receive free and reduced lunch and over 20% of youth under 18 live below the poverty level.

The Page County Porch Visitors program is administered by **Virginia Jeffries, Supervisor of Nutritional Services for Page County Public Schools**, and **Megan Gordon, Program Director for Page Alliance for Community Action (PACA)**. In this interview, we spoke to them about how they launched Porch Visits in their community, the unexpected benefits of the program, and the advice they would provide to other communities interested in launching a pilot.



You are currently running a very successful Porch Visits program in Page County, Virginia. Can you explain what exactly the Porch Visits program is?

Megan: It's a program to provide food on a weekly basis, as well as additional resources, to families with youth who are 18 and under in Page County.

What does a Porch Visit look like?

Megan: The Porch Visitors come and pick up meals that are prepared by Luray High School's service staff, as well as additional food products and diapers that the families need. They take these items to the families, and then they have conversations with them about other things that they may need help with.

Virginia: Porch Visitors are connectors and navigators for the families they work alongside. And if one of our Porch Visitors or partner groups finds out about another program or opportunity that exists, we tell families about it—which happened frequently during the height of the pandemic.

Who are the Porch Visitors and how did you recruit them?

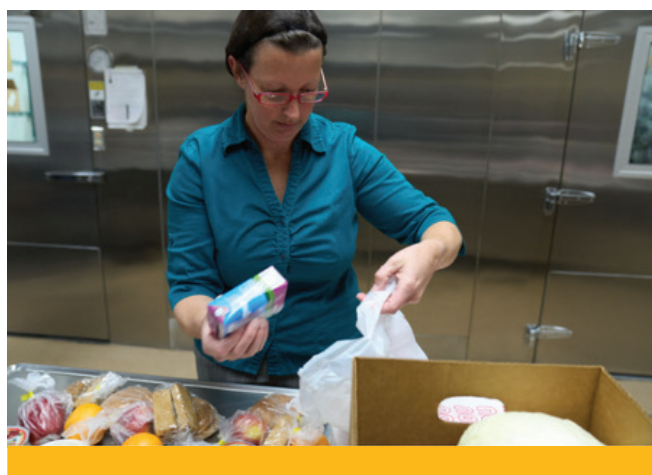
Megan: Porch Visitors are paid through the funding that we received from No Kid Hungry. We mostly recruited visitors through the school system because they already worked with a lot of the families.

How are you finding the families that then become part of the program?

Megan: We first reached out to families who were recommended through the school system, some of whom were in temporary housing or were unhoused. We also advertised the program on social media and through other channels where families could sign up to participate. Now we are receiving a lot of families through word-of-mouth referrals too.

Can you explain how the program works administratively?

Megan: It is truly a team effort. Virginia and I are the two administrative leads, organizing various priorities from finance to meals to logistics - but we do have a lot of partnering agencies. The school system is a huge community partner. We also partner with Healthy Families, a local organization working with households that have children 0 to 5, as well as the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank and Page One Food Bank where we receive food at lower or no cost.



Virginia: The actual creation of meals on a daily basis occurs with my team in the kitchens. We didn't hire any additional staff to do it. They're already making meals for breakfast and lunch. Also, Megan and I go to the food bank weekly and fill up a box truck with food that we deliver to our distribution school.

Megan: We provide more than the staples. For example, we provide diapers to families, and, for the holidays, we purchase special items such as turkeys and ham to supplement what was donated.

How did you first hear about the Porch Visitors idea?

Virginia: We learned of the idea through No Kid Hungry's Program Innovation team. We were an existing grantee at the time and they knew we were doing door-to-door deliveries. They reached out to share this concept and asked if we were interested. I remember saying, "This is a fantastic opportunity, but I just can't do this alone." But I had a good relationship with PACA and so I went to Megan and I was like, "Hey, they've reached out, there's this grant." And thankfully PACA and Megan said yes.

What have been some of the biggest success stories of the program so far?

Megan: I think on a large scale, just the way the program has grown. The fact that we have families who are referring other families to the program. But also, the connections that have been made between the Porch Visitors and the families are really meaningful too.

Virginia: We have visitors now that sometimes when something happens, good, bad, whatever, the first person that Porch Visit family wants to connect with is their Porch Visitor.

Can you explain how the finances work?

Virginia: In terms of the meals that we are preparing, due to COVID and some waivers that the Department of Agriculture granted, we are able to do what they call "non-congregate feeding," which means that the child can get food and not eat it on-site. We've leveraged that and we're trying to figure out a way to continue this program post-COVID-waiver.



-I couldn't have imagined some of the things that have come out of this program.

Megan: Absolutely start small and don't be afraid to do it. We got some great new partners out of it through the food bank. And we've strengthened our partnership even more with the schools and nutritional services too. Porch Visits will not only benefit families, but it will also benefit your organization and your program too.

PAGE COUNTY PORCH VISITORS

Since the program began in 2021, Page County Porch Visitors has generated over \$43,000 in revenue for Page County School Nutritional Services and reached over 80 families with:

- A trusted community member to help with feelings of stress and isolation
- 13,170 youth meals
- Adult meals
- Shelf stable food and produce boxes
- 787 packs of diapers
- \$5,955 in utility assistance and enrollment in utility assistance programs
- Help with budgeting and taxes, especially child tax credit
- Help with enrollment in Medicaid, WIC, and SNAP
- Wi-fi installation
- Tutoring for kids
- Free swimming lessons for kids

Virginia: Right now, we're providing additional breakfasts and lunches to more than 100 kids each week. I wouldn't be providing those 100 breakfasts and lunches and therefore I wouldn't be getting the federal reimbursement for those meals without Porch Visits - so the federal reimbursement for those meals has definitely helped our county. It also helps us in our food waste. Oftentimes at the end of a meal service, if we have some entrees or some vegetables left over, we package those up that day so that they can be used for our Porch Visit program and not go to waste.

If other communities were considering starting a program like this, why would you tell them they should do it?

Virginia: There are financial benefits to our school nutrition program, and they far outweigh any negatives. But for me, it's always about getting food in the hands of the kids who need it. It's also a way to check in on those families.

Megan: And it's a way to make connections to integrate families into the community, to help them grow within the community, and to get them to a place where they don't always need these additional resources.

Any advice for communities who are considering starting a program like this?

Virginia: Don't be scared. Start small, that would be my recommendation. There are going to be bumps in the road, but every bump that we've hit, we have far surpassed. And we've got these amazing families and amazing relationships-



Spotlight on The Family Resource Center of the Roaring Fork Schools

The Family Resource Center of the Roaring Fork Schools (FRC) in Carbondale, CO employs a two-generation, strengths-based approach to meet families where they are to provide support for overcoming non-academic barriers to student success. Their family liaisons help to address basic needs such as food; housing; utilities; transportation; medical and mental health care; financial literacy; and parenting skills. The FRC primarily supports the rural communities in the area, and most of the families are Latinx and Spanish-speaking. FRC's family liaisons are bicultural and bilingual and trained using the Colorado Family Resource Center Association's evidence-based family development programs.

The FRC piloted Porch Visits, and for their pilot conceived of the position of a field-based family liaison. The FRC partnered with the nutritional services team at Roaring Fork School District to deliver meals to the many students eligible for free or reduced school meals who were enrolled in online learning due to COVID-19. Grant funding from No Kid Hungry enabled them to test their idea of a field-based liaison who would deliver meals and provide the crucial services and case management FRC is known for to the most vulnerable families - those learning from home and unable to access meal distribution sites.

The FRC operated the pilot from February 2021 to the end of July 2021, with the field-based liaison visiting approximately fifty-five families per week. The field-based family liaison built strong, trusting relationships with families enrolled in the program. Over the course of the six-month pilot, the liaison kept in close contact with the district's food and nutrition services department, picking up meals from school cafeterias and delivering seven days' worth of breakfast and lunch for each student in the household.

Meal delivery was central to the pilot, and often enabled the family liaison to connect with families about other services they could use.

Upon starting the pilot, the FRC learned that many families did not have wi-fi. Especially during COVID-19 and distance learning, this left many families isolated and kids unable to attend school virtually. Over the course of the pilot, the liaison installed wi-fi for thirty-four families. In addition to meal delivery and wi-fi installation, Porch Visits allowed the FRC to connect families to other community services, as well as the suite of services offered by the FRC. During the pilot, the FRC referred families to supports for preschool, Medicaid, housing, utilities, and more. The field-based liaison also delivered other household supplies, as well as school supplies and homework when she visited. These services were especially important at a time when many families would have otherwise remained isolated and unable to access essential services.

INTERESTED IN IMPLEMENTING PORCH VISITS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Think about innovative relationships that can be forged between organizations in your community that serve kids and families. How might school nutrition services or local food banks partner with organizations serving kids and families in other ways? Consider how food and meals provided can be financially sustained. While more difficult after COVID flexibilities end, consider whether meals might be federally reimbursable.



No Kid Hungry's Program Innovation team designs strategies that meet the needs of families facing economic insecurity and works to improve the user experience of federal nutrition programs. For more information on this report, please reach out to innovation@strength.org.