



## Spotlight on Equity - Operation Food Search, St. Louis, Missouri

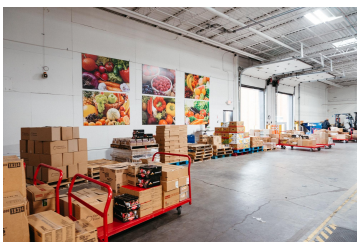
Operation Food Search (OFS) is a hunger relief organization in St. Louis that provides food and services to 200,000 people each month through their network of 330 community partners in Missouri and Illinois. In addition to food distribution efforts to meet families' immediate need, OFS works on long-term solutions to solve hunger and poverty by influencing public policy, advocating for meaningful program changes and providing community nutrition information and resources.

The OFS team is diverse and represents the St. Louis metro region they serve. The region is economically divided, and historically, OFS's programs pour into the lower resourced geographic regions while pulling support from higher resourced communities.

### Feeding Kids

OFS operates the SFSP and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-risk Afterschool Meals Program across the St. Louis metro area providing nutritious meals for kids when school is not in session. These two programs together allow OFS to provide meals year-round. For many kids, school is their main source of nutrition. OFS works closely with the community to keep a pulse on when and where schools are providing meals for their students, and with that information they fill in gaps. Summertime is crucial. Many districts only provide meals during the month of June and may only offer meals at select schools. OFS knows that proximity is everything. If kids can't walk to a meal location, they may not be able to participate. So, OFS works on making conveniently located sites so families don't have to travel too far to access a meal.

"The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) matters because the kids we serve matter." Melissa Weissler, Director of Child & Community Nutrition at Operation Food Search, shared that while the SFSP has room for improvements, it serves as a critical piece of increasing equitable access to nutrition.



## The Journey – From Food Distribution to Systemic Change

A few years ago, OFS decided that while the emergency food system (the bulk of OFS's operations at the time) may always be necessary, OFS must also address the root causes of hunger if they want to see meaningful reductions in food insecurity. They recognize that distributing food to communities stops immediate hunger but does nothing to impact systemic inequalities that cause hunger like racism, educational opportunity, and zip code. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, it amplified why OFS needed to shift their work to address the underlying causes of food insecurity.

Since then, they have increased efforts in advancing public policy, advocating for programmatic change, and providing holistic services for the families they serve. For example, OFS recognizes the link between food, health, and equity and develop innovative programs designed to work at that intersection. OFS provides food and supportive services to expectant mothers and children with diabetes – as well as their families – recognizing the unique nutritional needs of these populations. OFS also operates a farmer's market on wheels, the St. Louis MetroMarket, selling produce and other nutritious food at-cost in neighborhoods with little access to fresh food. OFS's work is holistic, collaborative, and designed to help create a future free from hunger.

## Listening Not Prescribing

OFS recognizes the importance of letting the community identify needs and how those needs would be best met. Weissler shares, "It's tempting to assume we may know best, but you really do have to trust the experts, and the experts are the people you are serving. You can't lose sight of that, and you have to build community listening into program models."

OFS is not afraid of feedback. They visit with families attending their summer and afterschool meals programs to find out what they like and where they can make improvements. Kids love to talk, and they give great (often direct) feedback. While it is tough to find out why families aren't attending, OFS does it's best to constantly evolve, iterate, and improve their summer and afterschool meals programs.

## Looking Ahead

Equity journeys are ever-changing and never-ending. OFS hopes to continue on their journey with intentionality in key areas:

- **Representing the community.** Because many of their programs rely on volunteers, the volunteer staff doesn't always reflect or understand the communities they serve. OFS is working to increase grassroots efforts that incorporate community members where the work is taking place.

***"The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) matters because the kids we serve matter."***

**– Melissa Weissler, Director of Child & Community Nutrition,  
Operation Food Search**



- **Providing culturally relevant meals.** OFS's strength is providing a high volume of meals across a large number of partner sites. However, because of this scale, they take a one-size-fits most approach which doesn't address individual or cultural meal preferences. St. Louis is the home to many new Americans and refugees. At their foodbank distributions, they work hard to meet cultural and personal preferences; however, they are unable to offer as much choice and cultural sensitivity in their summer and afterschool meals programs. In the future, they hope to find a solution that maintains the scale of operations while also addressing cultural and personal preferences.
- **Reaching rural communities.** OFS's summer and afterschool meal programs have decreased in rural areas outside of St. Louis. Due to cumbersome program guidelines and high transportation and time costs for families and providers, rural sites are incredibly difficult to make successful. OFS is looking to develop a way to serve these rural communities within the USDA program guidelines.

### Equity Work is Ongoing

While serving meals through the summer and afterschool meals program has its flaws, the programs are still critical pieces to equitably serving communities. A quote from one of OFS's summer meals site partners describes it well, "This is an essential resource for so many people. I've heard from numerous customers how our meals are the only chance they have to eat every day. There will always be issues, but it's super important that we all keep trying."

OFS will never stop trying. Weissler and her dedicated team will continue to listen and innovate to ensure all kids and their families in the St. Louis metro area have access to nutritious meals every day of the year.

