



## CASE STUDY: FREE SUMMER MEALS AT HOSPITALS PRESBYTERIAN HEALTHCARE SERVICES

### Sponsor in Focus

Presbyterian is a locally owned, not-for-profit healthcare system comprised of hospitals, a statewide health plan and a medical group in New Mexico. The healthcare system currently serves ten communities in New Mexico with nine hospital facilities. The summer meals program, part of a year-round meals program at Presbyterian, began in 2016 as part of the healthcare organization's increasing focus on nutrition and community health. Based on findings from community health needs assessments, access to healthy food was identified as a major area of concern. The motivation to introduce free meals for children was consistent with other nutrition initiatives throughout the organization, including a community garden, mobile farmers' market, and food prescription programs. While Presbyterian offers meals year-round to children, this brief will focus solely on their summer meals program.

In 2018, five of Presbyterian's nine hospitals served free meals to children as Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) meal sites. Program operations included both meals and snacks served on weekdays and weekends. Meal service was integrated into the hospitals' regular food service model, such that each hospital was able to operate as a self-prep site. In order to participate in the program, network hospitals applied to become sites by submitting a program plan, sample budget and other materials. Participating sites were also required to promote the program through specified strategies, including flyers posted around the hospital, promotional materials distributed to local organizations and information broadcast through local radio, newspapers and social media. One hospital in Albuquerque even wrapped an elevator door with signage promoting their summer meals program.

“One of the big reasons we participate in the ‘Kids Eat Free’ program is our purpose as a healthcare organization to improve the health of the patients and communities we serve.”

- Leigh Caswell, Director,  
Center for Community Health,  
Presbyterian Healthcare Services

## Key Stakeholders

The program originated within the network's Community Health Department, where a dedicated director pushed for the idea to be considered by executive leadership. Through coordination with the USDA and the administering state agency (Children, Youth and Families Department), there was also significant external support for the program. After gaining approval from hospital administrators and community health stakeholders, the Community Health Director met with various site staff to engage food service departments. It was essential to secure buy-in from the food service director at each site to mobilize and engage staff that would be working on the day-to-day operation of the program. This was the most important step in getting the program off the ground. Now, having been in operation for three years, the summer meals program has a strong reputation at Presbyterian, and the Community Health Department is receiving more requests to open summer meals sites. As a testament to Presbyterian's dedication to providing meals to kids in need over the summer, the Presbyterian Foundation will actually sponsor summer meal service at one hospital in 2019 that requested to serve as an open summer meals site but did not qualify due to geographic location.

## Outcomes and Next Steps

In 2018, Presbyterian served 9,754 summer meals across urban and rural communities, bringing the total number of summer meals served since the program began in 2016 to 16,469. After three years of program implementation, staff have adapted and worked through initial challenges to streamline the process for their sites and expand access to the summer meals program.

Food service staff at each hospital are now in full support of the program, thanks to training and support, ongoing communication with the program coordinator, and innovative strategies to streamline programming into regular food service. For example, one hospital was concerned that a large volume of children would disrupt regular food service operations. The summer meals program coordinator was able to work with site staff to develop a creative solution; they incorporated outdoor seating directly adjacent to the cafeteria to expand seating capacity and minimize disruption. This change was implemented in consultation with the administering state agency and required two additional part-time staff to oversee the large number of children participating in the program.

In 2019, the Presbyterian Healthcare Services network will continue to operate and monitor all existing summer meals sites. Three hospitals will offer breakfast and lunch, one will offer lunch and afternoon snack, and one will offer afternoon snack and supper. Some meal service time changes will occur due to the rescinded USDA Summer Food Service Program policy waiver regarding meal time restrictions ([SP 10-2017, SFSP 06-2017](#)).

Over time, administrative costs have been a key consideration for scaling up operations to multiple sites across the health care organization. Federal reimbursement to support the summer meals program at Presbyterian does not cover all costs, which necessitates ongoing financial investment from Presbyterian. Federal reimbursement covers the cost of meals, but program labor and administration have been covered using other funds. Instead of trying to remain cost-neutral, leadership at Presbyterian has opted to cover excess program costs as part of their community health plan budget. Presbyterian is willing to invest in the program's success because it is seen as an important nutrition initiative that benefits the entire community.