

Medical University of South Carolina

The Institution

The Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) is the state's largest comprehensive academic medical facility with 750-beds, level I trauma center, a nationally designated cancer center, and nationally recognized children's hospital. The enterprise records more than one million patient encounters annually and has a population of more than 20,000 clinicians, faculty, staff, residents and students. MUSC is a governmental entity funded and operated as a public institution of the state.



The Community

MUSC's main campus covers 80-plus acres in the heart of downtown Charleston. The greater Charleston area has a population of almost 700,000, or 14% of the state's residents, and the state's largest racial/ethnic groups are White (68%), Black (28%) and Hispanic (5%).

In South Carolina, adults are over the national benchmark thresholds for smoking, excessive drinking, physical inactivity and obesity, and the incidence of diabetes is one of the highest in the country. Twenty-one percent of children are obese, and 14% of caregivers report their child to be in fair or poor health.

Seventeen percent of South Carolina residents live below the federal poverty level, and 21% of children in Charleston County suffer from food insecurity. Most South Carolina youth do not meet the recommended servings of fruits, vegetables, or whole grains. Across the state, an average of 76% of students participate in the NSLP, although 80% participate at the elementary school closest to MUSC. Of those who qualify, only 19% participate in SFSP, suggesting a large unmet need during the summer months.

The Program

In May 2015, MUSC and their food service partner Sodexo became the first hospital in the Southeast to participate in the USDA's summer feeding program. MUSC was the sponsor, and three separate sites served hot food via the offer-vs-serve (OVS) model. The program was called 'Kids Eat Free at MUSC'. The program proved to be financially sustainable and non-disruptive to the normal retail operation. Since 2015, MUSC has served more than 18,900 summer meals.

The Stakeholders

Hospital support was garnered by Dr. Susan Johnson, Director of the Office of Health Promotion, and the implementation was championed by Sodexo Wellness Dietitian, Debbie Petitpain. The Sodexo Foundation, No Kid Hungry and Lowcountry Foodbank provided guidance and encouragement. The daily operation was managed and documented by a Master's in Public Health / Dietetic Internship student. Every summer since then, a part-time coordinator is hired for these duties. Within the organization, champions of Kids Eat Free were those who interacted with families the most, primarily the Sodexo food service employees and the MUSC guest services concierges, although people from all corners expressed pride, gratitude, and appreciation for the program.



The Outcomes

Kids Eat Free grew from serving 2,385 meals in 2015 to 5,870 in 2018. Collected data shows the program to be financially sustainable with the USDA reimbursement. Other quantitative measures have not been collected, because the program collects NO information from its customers, allowing each individual to enjoy the dining experience, regardless of who is paying. Anecdotal reports indicate that the program also positively impacts employee engagement and the patient experience.

Steps to Implementing SFSP at MUSC

MUSC is the sponsor of the program and has 3 sites on campus - two retail cafeterias and a cafe in the ambulatory care building.

MUSC qualifies as an “open site” because the nearby schools have >50% of children who qualify for free or reduced price school meals. As such, any child under the age of 18 can participate, allowing all customers to be treated the same (all families with children are offered the Kids Eat Free meal) and reducing stigma.

With multiple food outlets in the cafeteria, a friendly purple octopus mascot helps to direct flow to the hot line, milk cooler, and registers.

MUSC uses the offer-versus-serve (OVS) model to reduce food waste and manage labor costs, as participating children are served in the same manner as other customers. MUSC will still use OVS in 2019; the hospital applied for and received a waiver allowing them to continue using this service model after USDA’s Memoranda Rescission ([SP 10-2017](#), [SFSP 06-2017](#)).

"I told one of my patients' mom about the program. Her 1-year-old son had been here for eight months and his stay had been taxing on the family. She cried when I told her this was available for her four other children when visiting their brother. Thank you for pushing this forward. Every dollar - and every positive experience - counts for our families going through tough times."

Kristi Fogg, MS, RDN, Pediatric Registered Dietitian

The responsibility of ensuring that national nutrition guidelines are met falls on the food service staff. The food servers advise the families in selecting a combination of foods that meet the criteria. Cashiers verify the plate at the register with the assistance of the computerized POS system. Each transaction is reviewed for accuracy, allowing for immediate feedback to the staff.



The computerized POS system captures which recipes the kids choose, allowing Sodexo to demonstrate that the reimbursement rate covers costs and to describe the children’s preferred foods.

In year one, MUSC offered breakfast and lunch Monday-Friday during normal cafeteria hours. Now, meals are also offered on weekends.

In year one, bagged lunches were delivered to two outpatient pediatric clinics. Nurses distributed meals and kept required documentation. Close communication was required to predict how many meals were needed to minimize risk of preparing meals that would not be distributed. Because of the increased financial risk and labor, in year two, instead of delivering meals, the café on the first floor became an OVS site. Children can now get their meals and take them to the clinic to eat, having received permission from the state agency to do so.

Results, by the numbers:

- The program has served more than 18,900 free summer meals to children since it began in 2015.
- The preferred protein choice is chicken (50%), followed by fish (21%) and beef (16%).
- Milk is taken 80% of the time.
- Weekly averages: Main hospital: 44 breakfasts, 125 lunches; ART hospital: 17 breakfasts, 30 lunches; ambulatory care cafe: 35 breakfasts, 70 lunches.

Kids Eat Free has had a positive effect on employee engagement, and it’s not hard to imagine that it also has a positive effect on the patient experience.

MUSC hopes to support its newly acquired hospitals in South Carolina in starting their own summer meals programs. MUSC will also begin serving meals at the brand new children’s hospital opening in the Fall of 2019.