

FINDINGS FROM SUMMER MEALS FOCUS GROUPS

Share Our Strength – No Kid Hungry / April 2012



Methodology

- Seven focus groups were conducted the week of April 9th, 2012 among parents of children ages 5 to 16. All participant households earn less than or equal to 185% of the federal poverty level. The groups were separated by race and broken out as follows:
 - April 10, 2012; Little Rock, Arkansas (urban):
 - African-American parents
 - April 10, 2012; Pine Bluff, Arkansas (rural):
 - White parents
 - African-American parents
 - April 11, 2012; Denver, Colorado (urban/suburban):
 - White parents
 - English-dominant/bilingual Latino parents
 - April 12, 2012; Baltimore, Maryland (urban/suburban):
 - African-American parents
 - Spanish-dominant Latino parents
- Most qualify for and benefit from assistance programs, such as the Federal School Lunch Program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Overall Familiarity with Summer Meals



Familiarity with summer meals programs is low, but interest is high.

- With the exception of Denver Latinos, most parents have never heard of summer meals program.

*“Some kids eat lunch at the church, but it’s just a church that does summer activities.”
(African-American Parent, Little Rock)*

“Oh I think it’s a great program. During the summer, wherever the school is, you can go and eat, even if your children are older, up to 18.” (Latino Parent, Denver)

“Are these provided at school? I’ve never seen them.” (Latino Parent, Baltimore)

- But parents are very interested upon learning more about programs—most say they would consider sending their child or visiting a local site as a family.

“If this was in my area, I would take my children there.” (White Parent, Pine Bluff)

“Where can we sign up for that? I don’t know any place right now.” (White Parent, Denver)

*“If the government could really do this, that would be really cool, if these meals were free for kids.”
(African-American Parent, Baltimore)*

Need for food assistance is widespread, though interest might be highest at the lowest end of the income-scale.

- Parents struggle to make ends meet and wish there were more assistance programs for which they qualified. Free summer meals would help alleviate strain on tight budgets.

*“Kids eat up everything in the house during the summer. Feeding everyone kills your budget in the summer”
(African-American Parent, Little Rock)*

*“I think programs like that are essential—necessary. We can’t have kids going hungry...adults often need help.”
(White Parent, Denver)*

- But parents who qualify for free school meals seem most interested in summer meals. For parents at the slightly higher end of the income scale, free activities for kids are even more of an attraction than free meals.

*“I think it’s a nice thing to offer, give those kids something to do, make some friends.”
(African-American Parent, Pine Bluff)*

“We cook during the summer, but if this program is about helping those people who cannot afford food over the summer, that’s wonderful.” (Latino Parent, Baltimore)

Barriers to Participation

The background features a dark blue gradient at the top and bottom, with a lighter blue band in the middle. Overlaid on this band is a complex graphic of overlapping, curved, and straight lines in various shades of blue, creating a sense of movement and depth.

Transportation and site locations are major barriers to participation.

- Work schedules, distance to program sites, and lack of transportation are major barriers to participation. Parents suggest programs open early, close late (at the end of the work day), and provide free transportation. A few also suggest operating mobile meals programs.

“Put the meals on wheels and bring them to the kids.” (African-American Parent, Little Rock)

“It’s really a transportation issue ... And I don’t have much gas money to go anywhere right now, I call my mom these days to go to the doctor’s office.” (White Parent, Pine Bluff)

“I like the concept, but my concern is for parents who work during the day, these centers aren’t going to be open at 6am in the morning to take your kid before you go to work.” (African-American Parent, Baltimore)

- Many say they would only travel 5, maybe 10, miles to program sites (but most say < 5). Some would travel farther—up to 20 miles—for programs that offer activities as well.

“Five miles sounds about right, you could take them before work.” (African-American Parent, Little Rock)

“Depending on what kind of program it was, how interested the kids are in it, if it was really going to benefit them, I would get them there, even if it’s far.” (Latino Parent, Denver)

Parents need assurances that programs are safe and supervised in order to participate.

- Parents need to know that programs are safe – they are run by credentialed staff who sufficiently supervise the comings and goings of the kids that use them and are located in trusted community spaces, like churches or schools.

“I wouldn’t trust my kid with just any place or person for this. To me, there just aren’t enough background checks on places.” (White Parent, Pine Bluff)

“I would have to know they’re being watched.” (African-American Parent, Pine Bluff)

“The big question in my mind is the safety issue. The description says safe, but you need to know that’s a key component of this. You need to know how safety is going to be assured.” (Latino Parent, Denver)

- Parents want age-appropriate activities for kids and worry about sites which allow older and younger children to participate in activities together.

“You need to separate out the ages though, little kids can get hurt playing with teenagers.” (White Parent, Denver)

“I was thinking about the age breaks. Little kids shouldn’t be eating and playing with older kids.” (Latino Parent, Baltimore)

Sponsorships with trusted corporate and non-profit names can help bridge the credibility gap with unfamiliar parents.

- Parents are particularly interested in seeing governmental partners for summer meals programs such as school districts or state departments of education.

*“The school district—they have tables during registration with all kinds of community information.”
(White Parent, Denver)*

“Maryland Board of Education—they’re a partner.” (African-American Parent, Baltimore)

*“I like the seeing the Maryland flag on this. That means this is government approved.”
(African-American Parent, Baltimore)*

- Other trusted partners recommended by parents include:
 - Big Brothers Big Sisters
 - Boys and Girls Clubs of America
 - Girl/Boy Scouts
 - YMCA
 - Salvation Army
 - Girls Inc.
 - Pioneer Club (Colorado, Christian youth organization)
 - United Way
 - National or local fraternities or sororities (Baltimore, recommended by African-American parents)

Programs must be attractive to teens, not just parents, if older children are to participate.

- Teens set their own summer schedules. In order to attract teens—and younger siblings entrusted to their care—programs must offer appealing activities and opportunities to socialize.

*“Teenagers need some kind of activity, they need something to be interested in. For my son, that’s Tae Kwon Do.”
(African-American Parent, Little Rock)*

“If their friends go, teenagers will go too.” (White Parent, Pine Bluff)

*“Make the activities good. My 12 year old son isn’t going to sit down and do beading or something.”
(African-American Parent, Baltimore)*

- Parents suggest marketing programs directly to teens—potentially through social media sites like Facebook.

“Maybe market it in the high schools and middle schools so going is more the kids’ idea than the parents’, that might help.” (White Parent, Denver)

“They could share sites on Facebook, kids go on Facebook a lot. These programs should be marketed to teenagers specifically, really. They are the audience.” (Latino Parent, Baltimore)



Benefits of Summer Meals Programs

Free healthy food, free activities, and a safe place to socialize drives interest in programs.

- Free recreational and educational activities in a safe supervised environment, as well as the availability of healthy meals, are the biggest benefits to participation.

“I like that there’s fresh fruits and vegetables, and the meals are healthy.” (White Parent, Pine Bluff)

“That the programs are offering educational activities and providing a safe place. Also, getting exercise, that’s good too.” (African-American Parent, Pine Bluff)

“Education and sports activities—those are great.” (Latino Parent, Denver)

“A safe place to play—that phrase jumped out at me.” (African-American Parent, Little Rock)

*“That it’s a safe place, that’s important to me. I want my daughter to be in safe place, she’s vulnerable.”
(White Parent, Denver)*

“I like the bit about knowing your child is safe.” (African-American Parent, Baltimore)

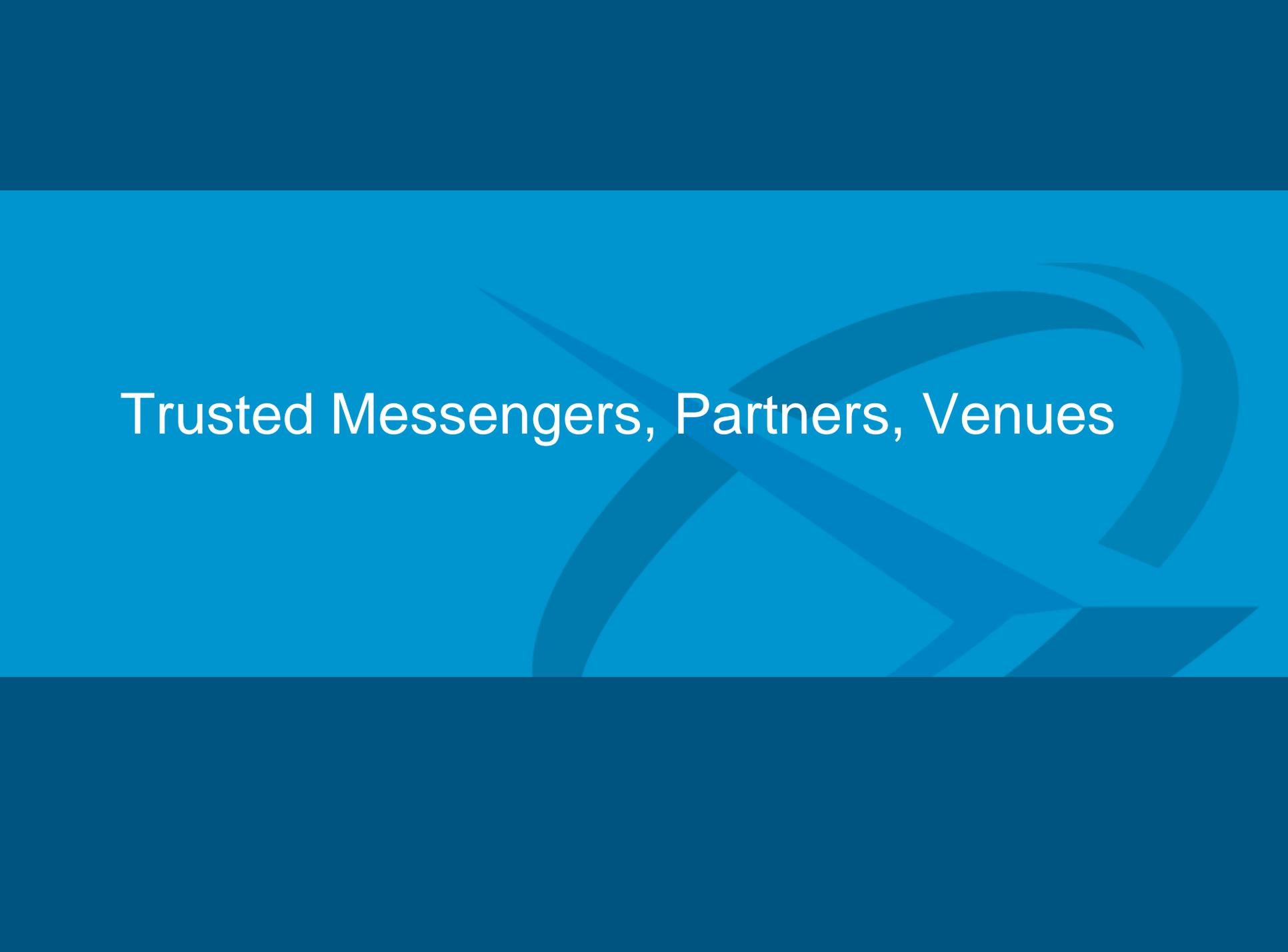
The main attractions...

Parents were asked to review a description of summer meals programs and circle things they liked...



Recommended activities for attracting kids of all ages (including teens)...

- Sports (Tae Kwon Do, softball, basketball, soccer, baseball)
- Learning opportunities and tutoring programs
- Music, drama, art (including jewelry making)
- Cooking classes for parents and children
- Swimming
- Movies
- Board games
- Bowling
- Activities for parents and children to enjoy together



Trusted Messengers, Partners, Venues

Schools and churches are the most trusted program venues (teachers and religious leaders are also trusted messengers).

- Parents trust schools to host children over the summer.

*“If it’s a school, you know everyone there is safe and they’ve already been approved.”
(White Parent, Pine Bluff)*

*“I would take them to churches...maybe the schools too. Those are all safe places.”
(African-American Parent, Pine Bluff)*

*“My son goes to different youth group centers...I’ve been there myself, so they’ve earned my trust.”
(Latino Parent, Denver)*

- Beyond schools, parents would trust to send their children to summer meals programs hosted at:
 - Churches
 - Summer camps
 - Parks and recreation centers
 - Libraries
 - Youth centers
 - City pools

Distribute information anywhere parents and children congregate but schools are clearly the best disseminators of information.

- Parents want more information, and they want program sponsors to get the word out in every way possible. If they had to choose, parents prioritize getting information.
 - Through their child's school (information for summer meals programs should be distributed along with enrollment information for the Federal School Lunch Program at the start of the school year);
 - In the mail in the form of a letter or postcard;
 - On local radio stations; and
 - In the news.
- Most prefer to call a hotline or visit a website for more information to texting. However, parents will text for site locations or to receive hotline or website information.

“It’s just easy, I text a lot. It’d be nice to save time not calling for locations.” (White Parent, Denver)

“You need a lot of information about this program. Texts are very compressed, I’d want to get a website to look at in the message.” (African-American Parent, Baltimore)

Other popular means of getting the word out...

- Parents suggest grocery stores—both local and national chains—as obvious marketing venues for summer meals programs.
- Other venues for distributing information:
 - Walmart
 - Kmart
 - Libraries
 - Doctors' offices, community health centers
 - Government services offices (ESL, adult literacy, vocational training, WIC, Medicaid, Social Services offices)
 - Car windshields in parking lots
 - Barber shops
 - Facebook (for reaching teens specifically)
 - Gas stations
 - Bus stops/public transit generally
 - Parks
 - Popular fast-food chains (McDonalds, Chipotle)
 - Daycare facilities
 - Shelters
 - Community centers
 - Public housing centers

Education leaders and teachers are the best messengers.

- School leaders and teachers, followed by faith leaders, families and children who participate in programs, and health care providers are the most trusted messengers of information about summer meals programs.

“Someone who’s been to these programs, someone with experience.” (African-American Parent, Pine Bluff)

“I think information should come from the schools. The church too.” (White Parent, Denver)

“If it comes from the school, we’ll look at a flier.” (Latino Parent, Baltimore)

- Parents would also trust coaches and leaders of youth programs, local elected officials, and local news anchors or weather persons for more information.

“ Use the mayor, you want someone you actually know.” (African-American Parent, Little Rock)

“It’s better to use a local celebrity or a news person—the weatherman maybe.” (White Parent, Pine Bluff)

“Coaches are good spokespeople as well, gym teachers and coaches do usually seem to be the kids’ favorite teachers.” (White Parent, Denver)

Best Communication Practices

The background features a central graphic composed of several overlapping, curved, light blue lines that intersect to form a large, stylized 'X' or a complex geometric pattern. The lines are smooth and have a slight gradient, giving the graphic a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, consistent with the blue color scheme of the slide.

State materials are largely well-received.



Images from Maryland materials



Images from Colorado materials

Free Summer Meals
Comidas de Verano Gratis

All children 18 and under
No registration required. No ID required.

Todos los niños de 18 años y menos
No es necesario registrarse. No se pide identificación.

CALL/LLAME 1-888-4KID4AR
<https://dhs.arkansas.gov/dccece/snp>

The poster features a yellow background with large, overlapping circles in shades of yellow and green. The text is in bold, green, and purple fonts.

Images from Arkansas materials

As are fact sheets and USDA letter templates.



When school is out for the summer, meals will still be in session. Learn how to get free summer meals.

What is the Free Summer Meals Program?

The Free Summer Meals Program is a federal nutrition program designed to feed children free, nutritious meals and snacks during the months of June, July, and August when school is out.

What are the requirements for my child to receive a meal? Do I have to fill out an application form?

There is no application necessary to receive a meal. Children ages 18 and younger can just show up at a Free Summer Meal site during meal time.

Is there a cost?

Free Summer Meals Program is FREE to all children ages 18 and younger.

How do I find a D.C. Free Summer Meal site in my area?

Click on the following link t, and you'll find a [map and list](#) of the city's free summer meal sites.

What kind of food is served at these sites?

Free Summer Meals sites serve nutritionally balanced meals that meet USDA guidelines. A typical lunch, for example, will include a turkey sandwich on wheat bread, milk, an apple, and a salad.

Click the following link for a [sample menu](#).

Do summer meal sites offer activities?

Many sites offer safe, fun, and enriching activities. To find out the type of activities offered, call the site. For more summer programming options, visit: [xx.gov](#)

There is no site in my area. What can I do to be sure that one is available for the children in my area next summer?

If there are no summer meals sites in your community, we can HELP. Contact X at: X or email [info@x.org](#).

What else can I do to help?

You can share information about the Free Summer Meals Program with your friends, neighbors, and family members.

Who funds the Summer Food Service Program?

The Free Summer Meals Program is federally funded under the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and administered by the Office of the Superintendent of Education (OSSE), Wellness and Nutrition Services.

Have other questions? Please contact Hunger Solutions at: X; email: [info@X.org](#), or text to: XXXXXXXX.EAT

USDA Template for parent letter



Summer Food Service Program

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

Summer is coming soon. You may be thinking about what your child will do for meals while school is out. The good news is that the U.S. Department of Agriculture partners in your local community to serve free meals. It's food that's in, while school is out. There are no income requirements, and any child under age 18 may come to eat.

Here is information about your local Summer Food site:

Days meals are served:

Times meals are served:

Place where meals are served:

Contact for more information:

We look forward to seeing your child this summer! Thanks!

Sincerely,



Food that's in when school is out.

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Material Recommendations

- Use images with kids of all ages (including teens), diverse range of ethnicities, healthy foods such as fruits and veggies, parents with children, and depict a range of activities.
- Avoid language like “hungry”, “low income” or “vulnerable” and position as programs open to all families.
- Calls to action are crucial—parents appreciate materials that list phone numbers or websites where they can go for more information.
- PSAs should feature families having fun (NOLA and Florida PSAs). All media materials should visually and/or audibly communicate the sense of fun programs provide in safe settings.
- The most important pieces of information to provide:
 - a program overview
 - transportation availability
 - site locations
 - requirements for participation
 - no cost required
 - a description of healthy food provided
 - reference to additional activities
 - how to get more information

Parents need both long and short form materials.

- Short form materials should be made available at schools, churches, grocery stores, in the media, and through the mail.
 - Yard signs
 - Banners
 - Post cards
 - Business cards
 - Radio spots
 - TV spots
 - Fact sheets
 - Fliers
- But parents also stress the importance of providing more in-depth information (locations, transportation, available activities, information about the safety of programs) in the form of letters home and fact sheets (print and online).

Language Recommendations

Words to Use

“Helps families in tough economic times” • “Helps stretch tight budgets”

“Helps families save” • “Healthy” • “Safe”

“Activities” • “Free” • “Fun”

“Learning opportunities” • “Fight Obesity”

Words to Lose

“Vulnerable” • “Hungry” • “No paperwork or enrollment required”

Instead...

“Programs for all families in your community”

“No proof of income necessary”

Summer Meals in 30 Seconds

Free summer meals are available to kids and teens ages 18 and younger at hundreds of summer meals sites across [CITY/STATE]. Many sites offer **fun learning and recreational activities** so kids and teens can **stay active and spend time** with friends while **enjoying healthy meals**. Sites are registered with the USDA and are held at **safe local places** like schools, churches and community centers. Meals served are tasty, follow **USDA nutrition guidelines**, and **help families save money**. There are no lengthy applications to fill out and programs do not require proof of income. Summer should be a stress-free time for parents and kids, full of **food, friends and fun**. Free summer meals can help.

If you or someone you know is interested, go to www.XXX.com or call 1-XXX-XXX-XXX to find a site and learn more or text “[xxx]” to 877-877 to find a site near you. Brought to you by [SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS].

Language for fact sheets and fliers

FREE SUMMER MEALS FOR KIDS AND TEENS

Summer should be a stress-free time full of food, friends and fun. Free summer meals can help. Meals are served at sites in the community such as schools and churches and many sites offer fun learning and recreational activities.

Programs:

- Are FREE to kids and teens ages 18 and younger
- Follow USDA nutrition guidelines and are funded by the USDA
- Provide a fun, safe place for kids and teens to stay active and spend time with friends
- Help families save money
- Do not require parents to apply or show proof of income
- [OTHER INFO – TRANSPORTATION, MOBILE MEALS, ETC.]

Go to www.XXX.com or call 1-XXX-XXX-XXX to find a site and learn more, or text “[XXXX]” to 877-877 to have a site address texted to you.

[PLACEHOLDER FOR SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS LOGOS]

Other Marketing Recommendations

- Target individuals on the lowest end of the income scale—those receiving free school meals. Reach these families through public housing and government service offices.
- Utilize churches and religious leaders in local campaigns—they are trusted messengers for passing out fliers and safe locations for hosting programs.
- Avoid words like “hungry,” “vulnerable,” or “low-income.” Position programs as beneficial for all and open to entire communities.
- Market to teens as well as parents. Teens need to see their peers at program sites—recruit them through activities, and solicit them as both participants and program volunteers.
- Past and current summer meals attendees are excellent messengers. Testimonials are effective persuasion—parents trust the experiences of fellow parents.
- All communications—including brochures, online resources, and hotlines—should be available in Spanish as well as English.
- Enlist local journalists to get the word out. Parents want to find out about programs through the news and trust local media personalities.