

MEMORANDUM

TO: Share Our Strength

FROM: Global Strategy Group

RE: Findings from Summer Meals Focus Groups

DATE: April 2012

Share Our Strength commissioned Global Strategy Group (GSG) to conduct focus groups with low-income families in three states to explore familiarity with and perceptions of local summer meals programs. The research was intended to help Share Our Strength and its No Kid Hungry partner organizations better understand how to market and communicate summer meals program details to prospective families. Seven focus groups were conducted between April 10 and April 12, 2012 in: Little Rock and Pine Bluff, AR; Denver, CO; and Baltimore, MD with a mix of Latino, African-American and Caucasian parents, all of whom fit the profile of families who qualify for the National School Lunch Program.

Overall, awareness of summer meals programs is low but interest is high. With the exception of Denver Latinos, parents are largely unfamiliar with free summer meals programs for children and teens in their area. Parents have largely positive impressions of summer meals programs as described and many would be interested in sending their children, or participating along with their children, in a program in their community. There is a great need for **free** summer meals programs in communities. Some families are forced to cut corners in other areas of their household budgets to account for higher food costs when their children are off from school for the summer. Following are the key findings from the focus groups:

Perceptions of Program Benefits: The benefits of summer meals programs are many, but the largest perceived benefits among focus group participants were: Have fun, recreational activities for kids in addition to healthy meals; Provide tutoring and other educational programs in addition to healthy meals; Provide a safe place for children; Programs are **free** and there is no cost to participate; and Provide **healthy** meals prepared with fresh fruits and vegetables (as well as physical activity).

Teens are Hard to Reach: No matter how much parents want their children to participate in free summer meals programs near them, parents of **teens** admit that unless their child **wants** to go, they may not be able to persuade their teens to participate. Teens need to be marketed to directly either as end users of programs or program volunteers.

Location and Transportation are Barriers: Transportation is a significant barrier to program attendance. Programs need to be located within walking distance of homes or transportation needs to be provided if programs are to serve substantially more families. Some families do not have cars of their own to get their children to and from programs, and working parents have no way of getting their kids to programs unless they can drop them off before work and pick them up at the end of the day. Even then, programs need to be located within 5-10 miles of where they live or work (**preferably less than five miles**) for parents to attend or send their children. Most parents say that bus transportation would need to be provided to and from programs in order for their children to participate.

Families Have Safety Concerns: Safety is a key concern for all parents when evaluating programs and potential participation. Parents are concerned about the safety of potential program sites and will only send their children to supervised environments in respected community spaces, like schools, to enjoy

summer meals and activities. They also want to know that program sites are licensed to provide services to children and employ credible professionals and volunteers to staff programs. Parents will not send their children to programs unaccompanied by an adult without being able to visit sites themselves first (and some will never feel comfortable sending their child unattended). **That programs provide a safe environment for children to play while parents are at work is a VERY persuasive messaging point**, but parents must be made to believe that sites truly provide safe, supervised, and structured environments for kids.

Program Sponsors Provide Credibility: Trusted corporate and non-profit partners will help bridge the credibility gap with parents. Corporate and not-for-profit sponsorships and partnerships lend credibility to programs hosted by less familiar organizations and venues. Upon reviewing Maryland marketing materials, parents were happy to learn that summer meals programs in their area were sponsored by or being held in conjunction with the Sodexo Foundation, Walmart, Maryland State Department of Education, and the State of Maryland. They trust all of the sponsors listed to host safe and enriching programs for families such as **Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Clubs, Girl/Boy Scouts, National or local fraternities and sororities, YMCA, Salvation Army, State Departments of Education/Boards of Education and United Way.**

Trusted Venues for Sites: Schools are the preferred site for summer meals programs. Parents not only trust their local schools to take good care of their kids, but most parents have a school within a few miles of their home that they or their children can get to. Beyond schools, parents would trust to send their children to summer meals programs hosted at **churches, summer camps, Parks and Rec centers, libraries, youth centers and city pools.**

Spreading the Word: Parents want more information about summer meals programs in their area, 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; In the mail in the form of a letter or postcard; On local radio stations; and In the news.** Beyond this, parents suggested churches, grocery stores, doctor's offices, local businesses, fast food restaurants, public housing complexes, parks, daycare, outdoors and through other social service programs/caseworkers.

Spokespersons/Messengers: Parents look to schools to host summer meals programs and to educators as trusted sources of information about programs. **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. Parents would also trust coaches and leaders of youth programs, local elected officials, and local news anchors or weather persons for more information.

Outreach Materials: Parents respond favorably to all marketing materials tested and low attendance is more a product of lack of familiarity with programs than problems with materials. Recommendations for materials generally: **Always include a call to action** with a phone number to call or a website to go to for more information; **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.

Words to Use: Helps families in tough economic times, free, helps stretch tight budgets, helps families save, fun, activities, learning opportunities, safe, healthy, fight obesity. **Words to Lose:** Vulnerable; hungry or hunger (instead say, programs for all families in your community); No paperwork or enrollment required (instead say, no proof of income is necessary).
