



Summer Meals for Children Site Barriers and Opportunities

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Background

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) – colloquially known as the Summer Meals Program – is a federally-funded food aid program, where breakfasts and/or lunches are available free of cost to children 18 years of age or younger during their summer break from school. Summer Meals sites are run by both local government agencies (most often school districts) and nonprofit groups. They exist across the country at sites as diverse as public schools, community pools, public parks, libraries, and community centers.

In 2019, the federal government reimbursement rate for most sites was \$2.56 per breakfast and \$3.97 for lunch. Some rural sites, and sites in Alaska and Hawaii, had slightly higher reimbursement rates. These reimbursements are, in theory, supposed to cover both food costs and administrative expenses. The reimbursement rates in urban areas, however, are often not reflective of higher labor costs and can make sites struggle financially.

No ID or registration is required for children to consume the meals, but a number of restrictions to the program exist that may limit participation including (usually) serving cold meals, prohibiting children from eating their meals off-site, and excluding parents and guardians from consuming meals. Additional barriers include travel distance from the sites, weather concerns, and the quality of the food. We surveyed 52 administrators and employees at Summer Meals sponsor sites across the country to obtain their opinions of the program and their recommendations on how it can be improved.

Methodology

We created a survey for employees and managers at Summer Meals Sponsor sites to assess their opinions on the program. We asked questions inquiring about their thoughts on the impact of the site location, weather, food taste and nutritional quality, funding, and other structural barriers to program utilization. An online survey was created on Survey Monkey, which was sent out to Summer Meals Site employees across the country. 52 responses were obtained.

Results

Site Logistics

Site Location Information and Impact

56 percent (n=52) of respondents thought **sites were ideally located** to serve children in their area. 61.5 percent (n=52) thought that having more sites in their area would increase participation (23 percent thought they had enough sites in their area).

Impact of Weather on Summer Meals Participation

32.7 percent (n=52) of respondents thought that **bad weather** (rain, lightning, hail) decreased summer meals participation greatly (42.3 percent responded "Somewhat", 21.1 percent thought bad weather didn't decrease participation, and 3.8 percent didn't know, n=52). 21.57 percent (n=52) of respondents thought that **hot weather** decreased summer meals participation greatly (35.3 percent responded "Somewhat", 37.3 percent thought bad weather didn't decrease participation, and 5.9 percent didn't know, n=52).

Parents/Guardians Consuming Meals with Their Children

64.7 percent (n=52) of respondents thought that if parents/guardians could **consume free meals with their children**, participation in summer meals would increase (21.6 percent responded "Somewhat", and 13.7 percent thought it would not increase participation or were unsure, n=52).

Consuming Meals Outside of Site

73.1 percent (n=52) of respondents thought that if **meals could be consumed outside of the site** participation in summer meals would increase (21.1 percent responded "Somewhat", and 5.7 percent were unsure, n=52).

Activities (recreation, pool, educational activities, entertainment, etc.) At Summer Meals Sites

52.94 percent (n=52) of respondents thought that if sites **had more activities**, participation in summer meals would increase (17.7 percent responded “Somewhat”, 15.7 percent thought participation would not increase, and 13.7 percent were unsure, n=52).

A number of respondents (5 out of 52 respondents) said that **transportation was a huge barrier** against summer meals participation.

Food Quality

Perceived Nutritional Quality of Food at Summer Meals Sites

38.5 percent (n=52) of respondents considered the **nutrition quality** to be great (40.4 percent considered it “Good”, 17.31 percent considered it “Decent”, and 3.9 percent considered it “Poor”, n=52). 26 percent (n=43) thought increasing the nutritional quality would increase participation greatly.

Perceived Taste of Food at Summer Meals Sites

30.8 percent (n=52) of respondents considered the **taste of food** to be great (28.9 percent considered it “Good”, 19.23 percent considered it “Decent”, and 13.5 percent considered it “Poor”, n=52).

56.5 percent (n=46) thought improving the taste of food would increase participation greatly.

Program Structure and Funding

31.3 percent (n=51) of respondents thought the reimbursement rates and funding levels for summer meals were Poor or Decent. Only 7.8 percent considered these to be “Great” (n=51).

51.9 percent (n=52) of respondents at Summer Meals Sites and hunger non-profits thought that an increase in funding would increase the number of meals served (n=52).

Additional Comments from Respondents

“Better transportation would increase participation. Transportation is a huge barrier in a rural area.”

“Children complain about the temperature of the food. They constantly ask if hot food is available.”

“Even if everyone is not able to take a meal off-site, I think there can be some criteria created so a child can take a meal off-site if the location of the site is located in a very violent part of the town/community.”

“The children in our program did not enjoy when cold chicken was served to them. They typically do not eat cold meals at home so it was hard to get them to eat the main dishes.”

“Administration of this program- paperwork and training required for SFA sponsors is excessive. Make this program easier to run for site sponsors, and we would have more sites.”

“If we can leverage our ability to better service the communities and create more ease of access for the sites willing to service the communities I believe we would see more participation.”

“We need better access to fresh produce and cooperative bids for the food that last through the summer months.”

“Maybe take a poll and see what the kids like to eat and make a meal to cater to that.”

“Would increase meals if able to waive the congregate feeding requirement for mobile meals. Would increase meals if sponsors could serve all three meals. Would be a help for start up funding for new programs.”

“Parents should be able to eat.”

Acknowledgments

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