

Rural Transportation Grants Successfully Increase Summer Food Participation

An Analysis of the 2005-2006 Progress Report

Background

When school lets out, millions of low-income children lose access to the school breakfasts, lunches and afterschool snacks they receive during the regular school year. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides funds for organizations to serve nutritious meals to low-income children when school is not in session.

Unfortunately, SFSP is extremely underutilized by rural communities. Fewer summer food sites operate in rural areas and even in communities where sites exist, long distances between children's homes and the sites, combined with the rising cost of fuel, prevent many children from receiving summer meals.

To address this issue, Congress provided \$4 million to establish Rural Transportation Grants for the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) through the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. In 2005, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducted a competitive grant process and awarded grants to service institutions in five states including Mississippi, New York, Oregon, Texas and West Virginia. Twenty-seven institutions participated in the 2006 SFSP Rural Transportation Grant Program. The funds were used to increase participation at congregate feeding sites through innovative approaches to overcoming limited transportation resources in rural areas.

The Rural Transportation Grants provide the support needed to increase participation in the Summer Food Program in rural areas. Summer Food plays a critical role for low-income children during the summer months, ensuring that they have access to nutritious food while school is out.

The statute requires reports on progress be submitted to Congress in January 2007 and January 2008. This is an analysis of the 2007 progress report.

Overview of First Year

Many of the rural transportation grant recipients were successful at adding transportation services to their summer programs. Nearly all met their goals to establish meal sites in the rural areas of their communities or to transport children from those rural communities to central meal sites. Transportation services had a positive effect on increasing participation in multiple meal services. Many sites were able to add a second daily meal to their existing program or saw a marked increase in participation in multiple meal services by children who were transported to the site. A few sponsors requested to postpone their rural transportation grant due to unforeseen circumstances so year two participation rates should be even higher.

- In 2006, **78 new meal sites** were established or served by the awarded service institutions.
- As a result of transportation services, approximately **2,977 more children** were served by the participating service institutions in 2006 than were served the previous summer.
- Approximately **100,115 additional meals** were served in 2006 by rural transportation grantees, a 37 percent increase over 2005.

Major Findings and Trends

Grants Allowed More Children to Be Served

In the first year of the grant period, all grantees reported that the transportation funding had enabled them to reach additional children. For example:

- The East Texas Food Bank was granted \$137,134 over three years to deliver meals to 17 new sites in an expansive rural area. In 2006, the food bank used \$11,941 of its grant funding and reached 312 more children than they had the previous year.
- Playmates Preschool and Child Care Center, Inc in West Virginia was awarded \$314,052 over three years to transport meals to summer program sites. In 2006, the project used \$64,034 of its grant funding and average daily participation increased by 282 children for a daily average of 464.
- North Bend School District #13 in Oregon was awarded \$198,993 over three years to purchase and outfit 6 vans to transport food to 22 rural sites. In 2006, the project used \$66,831 of its grant funding and their average daily participation increased by approximately 107 children to 499 per day.
- The Coffeerville School District in Mississippi was awarded \$110,649 over three years to purchase a van and equipment to transport food and to use school district buses to transport children to summer sites. In 2006, the project used \$35,437 of its grant funding and the school district established one new SFSP site resulting in an increase in average daily participation of about 80 children.

Average Daily Participation Increased

Transportation funding helped rural sites increase the number of students attending sites each day and helped make the Summer Food Service Program more effective to run. For example:

- Corning Painted Post Area School District in New York was awarded \$139,490 over three years to transport children and food to 13 sites using school district vehicles. In 2006, the project used \$46,642 of its grant funding and added seven new rural sites and increased average daily participation from 72 children to 424.
- Holmes County School District in Mississippi was granted \$125,840 over three years to rent school buses to transport children to five program sites. In 2006, the project used \$7,117 of its grant funding and they added two new meal sites and increased average daily participation by 217 children.
- The Bend-La Pine School District in Oregon was awarded \$91,605 over three years to lease buses to transport children to ten meal sites. In 2006, the project used \$19,517 of its grant funding and they added three sites and grew average daily participation by 94 children over 2005 levels.

More Children Ate Both Breakfast and Lunch

Transportation services allowed more children to stay at summer programs for both breakfast and lunch, increasing the number of healthy meals they received throughout the day. For example:

- The Southern Appalachian Labor School in West Virginia was awarded \$28,500 over three years to purchase two vehicles to transport children to a meal site. In 2006, the project used \$13,941 of its grant funding and served breakfast in addition to lunch, increased the number of service days and served 901 more meals than the previous year.
- The Winston-Dillard School District #116 in Oregon received \$22,700 over three years to use school district buses to transport children to an existing summer meal site. In 2006, the project used \$2,450 of its grant funding and served 2,352 meals and although average daily participation did not increase, an additional 133 meals were served, meaning that children were more likely to be present for both breakfast and lunch.

Additional Sponsors and Sites were Recruited

Providing transportation services made it more enticing for sponsors to join the Summer Food Service Program and for existing sponsors to add more sites. For example:

- Mississippians for Community Development was awarded \$82,130 over three years to rent vehicles to transport meals to program sites. In 2006, the project used \$19,641 of its grant funding and added three new meal sites to their existing SFSP and increased average daily participation by 447 children.
- Cattaraugus Community Action, Inc. in New York was granted \$80,816 over three years to deliver meals in four rented vans to 23 sites over three years. In 2006, the project used \$9,611 of its grant funding and increased the number of SFSP sites from one to eleven and average daily participation grew by 348 children.
- McDowell County School District in West Virginia was granted \$79,200 over three years to use school district buses to transport children to five meal sites. In 2006, the project used \$26,620 of its grant funding and increased the number of sites from four to ten and average daily participation increased by 314 students.
- Integral Youth Services in Oregon was granted \$63,946 over three years to lease a van and purchase storage equipment to transport meals to four rural farming communities. In 2006, the project used \$26,696 of its grant funding and served 3,585 meals and the project established meal service in four new sites in rural communities, serving an average of 101 children per day.

Mobile Feeding Sites were Established

Transportation grants helped establish mobile feeding sites to feed children in outlying rural areas. For example:

- The Beaverton School District Nutrition Services Department in Oregon was awarded \$61,558 over three years to purchase equipment to transport food to five sites. In 2006, the project used \$15,675 of its grant funding and added three mobile sites and served an additional 153 children.

Conclusion

The rural transportation grants clearly had a positive impact on the Summer Food Program, increasing the number of sites and allowing more children to participate in the program. In 2006, 2,977 more children were served through Summer Food than the previous summer and 78 new meal sites were established or served by the awarded service institutions. Children in all five of the participating states benefited from the rural transportation grants and had greater access to nutritious meals during the summer months, helping them stay healthy while school was out and making them better prepared to return to school in the fall.