

State Legislators' Guide to Promoting Simplified Summer Food

Overview

The Simplified Summer Food Program is a federal entitlement program that provides funds to schools, nonprofit organizations and government agencies to serve nutritious meals to low-income children when school is not in session. USDA provides funding through state agencies (generally state education agencies) to reimburse eligible sponsors for the meals and snacks they serve.

The Simplified Summer Food Program was previously only available in select states but is now available nationwide. It replaces the traditional Summer Food Program and removes complicated accounting rules that were previously required. This dramatically cuts paperwork and guarantees sponsors the full federal reimbursement for each meal they serve.

Purpose

This federal nutrition program plays a critical role in providing food to children who would otherwise go hungry during the summer months. 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. Without those nutrition supports, low-income families struggle to make ends meet. Food pantries and soup kitchens see an increase in the number of families with children that turn to emergency food during the summer months. The Simplified Summer Food Program is key to providing healthy snacks and meals to low-income children.

Benefits

The Simplified Summer Food Program:

- Offers healthy meals to children during the summer months.
- Attracts children to educational programming.
- Provides an important funding stream to summer enrichment programs.
- Supports local economies by bringing federal dollars into the state.
- Creates additional summer jobs, particularly for school food employees.

Current Barriers to Participation

The Simplified Summer Food Program is currently underutilized in every state. Nationally, only 1 in 5 children who receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year continue to receive meals during the summer months.

Low program participation in most states is due to:

- Limited outreach efforts to eligible children and families.
- A lack of summer food sites in neighborhoods with high need.
- Potential sponsors unaware of the program.
- Federal reimbursement rates that do not always cover the entire cost of the program.

What Can State Legislators Do to Increase Participation?

Every state could be reaching more low-income children through the Simplified Summer Food Program. State legislators can provide critical leadership around summer nutrition and help increase the number of sponsors and children participating in the program.

Explain the Benefits of Simplified Summer Food

- Many potential sponsors may not know that the traditional Summer Food Program has been replaced with the Simplified Summer Food Program, which reduces paperwork and guarantees sponsors the highest reimbursement rate.

State legislators can:

- Inform schools, nonprofits and government agencies that the Simplified Summer Food Program is now operating in their state and encourage them to become sponsors.

Provide Legislative Assistance

- Even with the higher reimbursement rate guaranteed to sponsors through the new Simplified Program, the federal reimbursement rate is not always enough to effectively provide healthy meals to children during the summer months.

State legislators can:

- Appropriate state funding to provide sponsors with additional reimbursements, start-up and expansion grants, and transportation and outreach grants.
- Require schools in high poverty areas to operate Summer Food sites (i.e. Missouri and Texas already have state Summer Food mandates).

Conduct Outreach Efforts

- Many children do not participate in Summer Food because they simply do not know that there are sites available to them in their community.

State legislators can:

- Visit Summer Food sites in the district to attract media and public awareness.
- Publicize Summer Food through constituent mailings, state and local human service agency newsletters, local newspapers, PSAs, and religious bulletins.

Facilitate State-wide Partnerships

- State-wide Summer Food coordination can go a long way in maximizing time and resources.

State legislators can:

- Plan Summer Food meetings for anti-hunger advocates, the state agency, schools, the Parks and Rec. Dept., nonprofits and others involved with Summer Food.
 - Use these meetings to encourage potential sponsors to participate and develop partnerships.
 - Encourage sites to stay open for the entire summer in order to ensure there is no "meals gap" between the end of the summer program and the start of school.
- Host a debriefing meeting at the end of the summer to discuss what went well with Summer Food in the district and what can be done better the following year.

Assist Sponsors in Rural Areas

- It is often difficult for children in rural areas to get to Summer Food sites.

State legislators can:

- Allocate state funds to provide transportation grants to sponsors in rural areas.