

A Governor's Guide to the Summer Nutrition Programs

FRAC
Food Research
& Action Center

Introduction

In every state across the country, many thousands of low-income children who rely on free and reduced-price school breakfasts and lunches to keep hunger at bay lose access to those meals when the school year ends. Without school meals, families face greater than usual struggles to afford food while also stretching tight budgets to cover childcare and summer programming. The impact of these summer nutrition and opportunity gaps is far-reaching and can have negative effects on children's academics, health, and development.

Fortunately, the federally funded Summer Nutrition Programs can help reduce food insecurity during the summer months while also helping to provide a safe place for children to learn and play. The Summer Nutrition Programs, which include the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program, are key resources that provide nutritious meals and snacks to children during the summer months. In addition to connecting children to much-needed nutrition, many programs offering summer food also offer educational and enrichment activities that keep children safe and out of trouble.

States that maximize participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs also can see positive economic ripple effects. Summer programs provide crucial child care and support for working parents, which helps them keep their jobs. Drawing down federal reimbursement means that summer programs are able to reallocate funding from other sources that was being spent unnecessarily on food and invest it in program improvements and staff, thus helping programs operate more sustainably. Most important is that children who are well-fed, active, and learning during the summer will grow into becoming healthier and more productive members of a state's workforce.



This guide describes practical steps to maximize summer nutrition participation. Despite their many benefits, the fact remains that the Summer Nutrition Programs are underutilized in every state. They serve only a modest fraction of the low-income children who rely on free and reduced-price school lunch during the school

year. In July 2017, just over 3 million children participated in the Summer Nutrition Programs. Final 2018 data are not yet available. Only one child received a nutritious summer lunch through the Summer Nutrition Programs for every seven who participated in free and reduced-price school lunch during the 2016–2017 school year.

This also means that states left millions of federal dollars on the table that could have been used to feed hungry children and support summer programs. If every state had just reached 40 children with summer lunch for every 100 participating in free or reduced-price lunch during the school year, an additional 5 million children would have been fed each day in July alone, and states would have collected an additional \$379 million in child nutrition funding for that month.

Governors can play a critical role in establishing and strengthening statewide summer meal expansion efforts to ensure each child returns to school in the fall well-nourished and ready to learn. This guide is designed to provide governors and their staff an understanding of the

Summer Nutrition Programs; examples of short-term and long-term actions that states can take to connect more families to summer meal sites; and best practices for successful implementation.

For more information about the Summer Nutrition Programs, refer to the Food Research & Action Center's (FRAC) [summer nutrition report](#) and [summer breakfast report](#).

Five Steps Governors can Take in January and February to Expand Summer Meals Participation

While planning and preparing for the Summer Nutrition Programs is in many ways a year-round effort, there are key steps that governors can take several months before summer to set a strong foundation for success. Detailed below are five immediate steps that governors can take to ensure more children have access to nutritious meals next summer.

1. Work With the Administering State Agency to set Expansion Goals

An important first step for expanding access to summer meals is to work with the state child nutrition agency that administers the program to set goals for expansion. Establishing benchmarks for growth demonstrates that closing the summer nutrition gap is a priority of the governor's administration. It also creates an opportunity to better track the progress made.



The Summer Nutrition Programs administering agency in every state is usually the state department of education, health, or agriculture. These state agencies are responsible for administering the program, including offering training to providers, collecting and tracking participation data, and ensuring the program is running correctly. To find the state agency that administers the programs in your state, refer to this [list of state-administering agencies](#) from USDA.

Working with the state agency to assess participation data also helps ensure that efforts are not being duplicated and that previously underserved communities are targeted with additional resources. To help inform expansion goals, states can compare program participation year to year and participation in summer lunch to school lunch during the regular school year. States also should determine if there are enough Summer Nutrition Program sponsors — organizations that enter into agreements with the state agency to run the program and that get reimbursed for every meal served — to serve the need and should map summer sites to identify eligible communities that are not being served.

Depending on a state's current participation levels and capacity to grow, expansion goals can focus on increasing the number of meals and snacks served at existing sites; adding additional meals to existing sites (such as adding breakfast at sites that only serve lunch); increasing the number of sites providing meals, especially in underserved areas; and recruiting additional sponsors. Most states will require a combination of these strategies to increase participation. By setting state goals and sharing those publicly, governors can provide additional momentum to expansion efforts.

2. Partner With Superintendents to Increase School Participation

As a trusted source and service provider with food service experience, schools are a natural fit for operating the programs, and they can play an important role in increasing access to summer meals in all communities.



Schools can provide federally funded meals at both school-based and community sites, oftentimes filling a capacity gap that exists. Serving summer meals not only supports students' health and well-being, but also allows schools to draw down more federal reimbursement that supports their overall school nutrition programs and creates the opportunity to retain staff.

Too many eligible schools that could be serving meals, however, do not participate. An effective way to get more schools serving summer meals is to educate district superintendents about the benefits — for students and the schools' bottom line — that the Summer Nutrition Programs provide. A letter from the governor on the importance of summer meals as a statewide priority can help positively shape districts' efforts and give many schools the incentive they need to participate.

Letters to superintendents should go out early enough (February or March) so that districts have enough time to identify eligible schools, apply to participate, and work out their program logistics. A sample letter to superintendents can be found in appendix 2.

3. Develop a Marketing and Outreach Plan

A primary barrier to connecting more children to the Summer Nutrition Programs is lack of awareness. Many children do not participate simply because they

do not know that there are sites available to them in their community. Governors can use their visibility to publicize and promote the availability of summer meals to families while also encouraging state and local agencies to do the same.

Governors can work with partners to create a strong, cohesive marketing and outreach plan, and use existing communication channels to disseminate the information. For example, information about the Summer Nutrition Programs can be shared through state communication channels, including social media, state agency websites, and newsletters. Governors also can film public service announcements and include talking points about summer meals during speaking events and town halls.

4. Connect With State Anti-Hunger Partners to Identify Gaps in Service

Many state and local anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations are already working on expanding access to the Summer Nutrition Programs and can share valuable insight on underserved areas, potential partnerships, and challenges to participation. Governors should reach out to anti-hunger groups and social service agencies to identify areas for growth and then use that information to shape expansion goals. FRAC's website has a [list of state anti-hunger organizations](#).

5. Convene Stakeholders for a Listening Session on Summer Meals

Holding a community listening session on summer meals can be a collaborative way for governors to learn more about the barriers to participation, gauge how much families know about the Summer Nutrition Programs, explore possible changes that would help more families participate, and call media attention to the program. Listening sessions can be organized in collaboration with anti-hunger organizations and held in areas currently underserved by the Summer Nutrition Programs. Governors can work with school districts to engage and invite families and partners to participate.

Additional Opportunities to Maximize Participation

Once expansion goals and targets have been set, and partners have convened, governors can implement additional longer-term strategies to increase the number of summer meals served.

Create a State Workgroup

Governors should establish a summer meals workgroup to further expand summer meals access. Convening invested stakeholders on a state level can bring new perspectives, expertise, and resources together; help shape goals and recommendations; facilitate new partnerships and strategies; and create a system in which progress is tracked and shared. Governor-led nutrition workgroups help lend the project more credibility, and are a demonstrable way for administrations to show their commitment to addressing hunger and supporting low-income families.

Workgroup members often include state agencies, program sponsors, statewide youth-serving program providers, social service providers, faith-based organizations, anti-hunger organizations and other groups dedicated to providing services to youth.

Develop a Multi-Year Statewide Marketing Campaign

Recently, many states have seen success in connecting more families to summer meals by marketing the program. The marketing and messaging of the programs can be tailored to the needs and demographics of the state, and governors can support efforts by allocating funding to redesigning, printing, and disseminating materials.

While they will vary from state to state, effective marketing campaigns should do the following:

- consider language barriers, i.e., materials should be translated into as many languages spoken in the state as possible;
- reduce the stigma associated with “free meals for low-income kids” by including messages that include all children and teens, are age-appropriate, and are visually appealing;



- attract more families and children and further reduce stigma by focusing equally on the importance of meals and programming; and
- include information about ways to find meal locations on all outreach materials. Families can call 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish), or text “Summer Meals” to 97779 for information on the nearest summer food site location. Families can search for the nearest site near them using the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) [Summer Meal Site Finder](#). Some states have their own summer hotlines that can be promoted as well.

FRAC provides additional state outreach and marketing ideas in [Outreach to Increase Participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs](#).

Increase Funding for Summer Enrichment and Educational Programming

Summer food and summer activity programs go hand in hand. The meals keep hunger at bay, and the program keeps children safe, learning, and active while their parents work, allowing children to return to school healthy and ready to learn. In too many states, there are not enough summer programs. Even when programs are available, struggling families often are unable to afford the fees for their children to participate. Investing state funds into summer programs is one of the most effective ways to increase participation in summer meals, and to support educational outcomes better.

State Investments in Summer Learning

A number of states, including California and Massachusetts, have prioritized summer learning by allocating funding to support such programs, but more states need to establish stable, sustainable summer funding opportunities to support summer learning and reduce summer hunger. A number of additional states are moving in the right direction. Nevada recently passed legislation that would designate certain tax revenue to support summer learning programs in low-income areas. Wyoming and New Mexico have allocated state funding to extend the school year and provide summer programming for students at risk of failing academically.

Every Student Succeeds Act

Another opportunity for states to prioritize summer programs that counter summer learning loss and provide a foundation for summer meals is in the implementation of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA, the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires each state to develop a plan for how it will close educational achievement gaps. Some states have incorporated increased access to the child nutrition programs and expanded summer learning opportunities in their state plans. For example, [Oklahoma's plan](#) includes efforts to combat hunger, setting a goal to increase the number of meals served through the Summer Food Service

Program by 30 percent by 2025, and supports offering summer programs. Governors can highlight this opportunity and encourage more school districts to prioritize summer programming. FRAC's resources on [ESSA](#) include [best practices](#).

State Legislation and Funding to Support Summer Meals

In addition to funding the underlying summer programming with state funds, states also can specifically support the Summer Nutrition Programs by allocating funds to supplement the federal reimbursement that sponsors receive from USDA, and passing legislation that requires low-income schools provide meals during the summer months.

Supporting Summer Nutrition Sponsors

In addition to supporting summer programming, states also can allocate funding to support summer meal sponsors directly. For example, California, Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Washington all grant state funds to assist Summer Nutrition Program sponsors with program start-up and expansion costs. Other states — including Minnesota, New York, and Vermont — provide summer meal sponsors a small state reimbursement for each meal served in addition to the federal reimbursement received.

Mandating Low-Income Schools to Participate in Summer Meals

One opportunity to increase the number of sites serving meals is for state legislatures to mandate that low-income school districts and schools (those in which at least 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals) operate the Summer Nutrition Programs. Targeting school districts or schools as sponsors can significantly increase participation in Summer Nutrition Programs. Strong mandates are those that are applied to all high-poverty schools, not just high-poverty schools offering summer school or enrichment programs. Mandates also can require schools to remain open for a designated number of days for summer meal service — a requirement adopted in Florida and Texas that has helped ensure that schools provide summer meals throughout most or all of the summer, rather than just for a handful of weeks.

Summer Learning Loss

Many of the children who face a nutrition gap when the school year ends also are affected disproportionately by summer learning loss. Also known as the “summer slide,” this refers to the erosion of academic skills and knowledge over the summer. Quality summer programs can help reduce summer learning loss, but are either nonexistent or unaffordable for many low-income families. This means that such children return to school in the fall academically behind their higher-income peers, struggling to catch up before classes even begin. Structured summer enrichment and educational activities provide an important foundation on which strong summer meals programs can be built.

To ensure access to nutritious meals and to close the summer learning gap, the Preble Street Maine Hunger Initiative worked with the state legislature to enact state legislation that requires high-poverty schools to operate summer programming by providing meals through the Summer Nutrition Programs. The state's average daily participation grew by 28 percent, from 12,613 children served in 2014 — prior to the passage of the legislation — to 16,157 children served in 2016.

State legislators and anti-hunger advocates can learn from the 10 states that have already adopted mandates for schools to operate the federally supported Summer Nutrition Programs. FRAC has a resource with more information about [state legislation for summer programs](#).

Best Practices

While planning and preparing for the Summer Nutrition Detailed below are additional promising practices that can help increase the reach of the Summer Nutrition Programs.

Partnerships

Schools as Nutrition Champions

School districts often have significant numbers of students attending summer school. To increase the number of school nutrition departments participating, governors can work with stakeholders to conduct outreach to eligible schools, identify barriers to participation, and assist schools in overcoming those barriers. States should also verify that every school is



sharing information about available summer meals with students' families, which is a requirement under the most recent federal Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act.

City Agencies and Elected Officials

City agencies and elected officials are trusted sources of information. Governors can work with cities in their state to ensure that city agencies are knowledgeable about the programs and that information on summer meals is being disseminated on both the state and local levels. Governors can further engage cities by hosting a summer meals challenge or attending kick-off events. More information can be found in the National League of Cities' issue brief [Cities Can Reduce Childhood Hunger Through Federal Meal Programs](#).

Libraries

Libraries in rural, suburban, and urban areas are providing meals alongside their summer enrichment programming. This is a natural fit as libraries are often the community hub, and a growing number of libraries are striving to better meet the needs of their community. Libraries can operate the Summer Food Service Program (as well as offer meals after school, on weekends, and during school holidays) as a sponsor, or they can participate in the programs as a site through a larger organization acting as a sponsor, such as a school, local government agency, or private nonprofit. [Learn more about serving meals at libraries](#).

Hospitals and Health Clinics

Hospitals and health clinics can participate in the Summer Nutrition Programs and improve summertime for children by providing free meals and activities on site to children 18 and younger, promoting the program through outreach, and engaging and creating new community partnerships. This model can greatly benefit communities where hospitals and health clinics might be easier to access than a school is during the summer, or where transportation to a school or other site is a major barrier to participation. Hospitals and health clinics can serve meals in a conference room, the cafeteria, or anywhere there is space for children to congregate and eat a meal. [Learn more about how hospitals can get started serving summer meals](#).

Service Models

Increasing Access in Rural Areas

Rural households with children are more likely to experience food insecurity than households with children in metropolitan areas.¹ States can help connect more children in rural areas to summer meals by maximizing existing resources. Schools, libraries, faith-based groups, 4-H programs, universities, and community colleges are just some examples of groups that often have a presence in rural communities and that may be able to provide space, programming, transportation, and other support to Summer Nutrition Programs. In addition to these examples, USDA Rural Development has grant resources through its Community Facilities Programs initiative to construct, expand, or improve facilities that provide health care, education, public safety, and public services. [Learn more about strategies for implementing summer meals in rural areas.](#)

Improving Summer Meals Quality

Nutritious and appealing summer meals draw children to sites and keep them coming back throughout the summer. There are opportunities in every state to encourage providers to improve the quality of meals served. Many states have seen success by combining summer meals expansion work with local food access through statewide food policy councils. States also can combine summer meals expansion efforts with farmers' markets initiatives by serving meals at markets. In Kentucky, the state incentivized local procurement by allocating additional state funding to sponsors that sourced local foods. In the District of Columbia, an additional reimbursement is available to sponsors that meet higher nutritional standards.

Mobile Meals

Implementing a mobile meals program is an effective strategy to reach children in more locations, especially those in rural areas or where summer programming is not centralized. Many communities have developed a "summer meals bus" to deliver meals to multiple sites in eligible areas.



Some of the buses are even refurbished so that children can eat on the bus. Governors can support mobile meals by allocating funding to support transportation costs or allow state vehicles to be used for transporting meals. Many successful mobile meal programs partner with other service providers, such as libraries or health clinics.

Conclusion

Governors have a key role to play in establishing strong summer meal campaigns that support and expand existing efforts to reach more children with the Summer Nutrition Programs. Governors can use their visibility and leadership to increase awareness, set expansion goals, and work with stakeholders to collaborate and coordinate plans for the upcoming summer and the summers beyond.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for expanding access to the Summer Nutrition Programs, but governors and their partners can choose the appropriate strategies in this guide to establish a state-specific framework for maximizing participation in summer meals programs. When that happens, children in every state will become healthier, more productive, and better able to live up to their full potential because hunger will not be holding them back.

¹Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbit, M. P., Gregory, C. A., & Singh, A. (2018). *Household Food Security in the United States in 2017*. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/90023/err-256.pdf?v=0>. Accessed on December 14, 2018..

Appendix 1:

Resources

FRAC Resources

- [*Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation — Summer Nutrition Status Report*](#)
- [*Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation — Summer Breakfast Status Report*](#)
- [*Summer Meals Fact Sheet*](#)
- [*Serving Summer Meals in Rural Areas Fact Sheet*](#)
- [*Child Nutrition Reimbursement Rates*](#)
- [*Outreach to Increase Participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs*](#)
- [*ESSA Opportunities to Increase Access to the Child Nutrition Programs*](#) (best practices)
- [*State legislation for summer programs*](#)

USDA

- [*Capacity Builder*](#)
- [*Summer Meals Toolkit*](#)

Additional Resources From This Guide

- [*List of state-administering agencies*](#)
- [*List of state anti-hunger organizations*](#)
- [*National League of Cities: Cities Can Reduce Childhood Hunger Through Federal Meal Programs.*](#)

Appendix 2:

Sample Letter From the Governor to School District Superintendents

Dear Superintendent **NAME**:

Each summer, far too many families in **STATE** struggle to provide their children with nutritious meals when schools close for the summer. The impact of this summer nutrition gap can have a negative effect on children's academics, health, and development, and means that many students return to school in the fall behind their peers.

The Summer Nutrition Programs can help address this need by providing free meals and snacks to low-income children 18 and under when school is not in session. School districts, local government agencies, and nonprofits can receive federal funding as sponsors of summer meal sites, which may be located at schools, parks and recreation centers, housing projects, migrant centers, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, summer camps, libraries, and other places where children congregate when school is out.

Not only do these programs help address childhood hunger and reduce food insecurity, they also help support **STATE'S** hardworking families, and bring more reimbursement into communities statewide. In July 2017, our state reached only **#** children with summer lunch for every **#** that received a free and reduced-price school lunch during the school year.²

We hope to work with you to do better. As a trusted source and service provider with food service experience, schools are a natural fit for operating the programs and play an important role in increasing access to summer meals in all communities. In addition to better supporting the children you serve, participating in the Summer Nutrition Programs means that your district can draw down more federal reimbursement to support your school nutrition program's bottom line.

I would like to remind you of the opportunity for your district to sponsor summer meals at your schools and other community sites. Expanding participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs is a priority for my administration, and we would be happy to help you work through any barriers to implementing the program. We hope that you give serious consideration to serving meals this summer.

Additional information and guidance on operating the Summer Nutrition Programs can be found at **STATE AGENCY SUMMER MEALS PAGE**. You also can contact **NAME** at **PHONE NUMBER** to determine which schools in your district are eligible to participate and learn about upcoming training opportunities.

Thank you for your hard work and commitment to ensuring that every child in our state returns to school in the fall healthy and ready to learn.

Sincerely,

NAME
Governor **NAME**

²Summer meals participation data: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018-summer-nutrition-report.pdf>

Appendix 3:

Sample Summer Meals Proclamation

State Summer Meals Matter Month

WHEREAS, Once the school year ends, many families in our state worry about their children's nutritional needs in the absence of school breakfast and lunch; and

WHEREAS, # in # STATE children live in food-insecure households;³ and

WHEREAS, Summer Nutrition Programs can help fill this nutrition gap by providing free meals and snacks to children who might otherwise go hungry; and

WHEREAS, STATE reached # children with summer lunch in July 2017 for every # that received a free or reduced-price school lunch during the school year;⁴ and

WHEREAS, Summer Nutrition Programs provide STATE children with a place to spend time with friends, learn, and stay active when the school year ends; and

WHEREAS, Summer meals alongside summer programming can help reduce learning loss and prepare children to return to school in the fall ready to learn and thrive; and

WHEREAS, By increasing participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs through community outreach, adding new meal sites, and investing in summer programming to attract more children to meal sites, STATE can increase access to healthy meals; and

WHEREAS, STATE is committed to making sure no child goes hungry year-round;

NOW, THEREFORE, I NAME, Governor, do hereby proclaim July as "STATE Summer Meals Matter Month."

NAME, Governor

³State food insecurity data: <http://www.frac.org/research/resource-library/state-of-the-states-profiles>

⁴Summer meals participation data: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018-summer-nutrition-report.pdf>

Appendix 4:

Sample Summer Meals Press Release

STATE to Connect More Children to Summer Meals This Year

STATE, DATE — Children’s access to healthy meals shouldn’t end with the school year. This summer, children in **STATE** can visit hundreds of sites across the state that are providing meals through the federally funded Summer Nutrition Programs.

“Too many children in **STATE** face a nutrition gap during the summer,” said Governor **NAME**. “The Summer Nutrition Programs provide nutritious meals alongside enrichment activities in a safe and supervised environment, and help combat childhood hunger in our community. It is important that our state’s children have the nutrition they need to grow up healthy, happy, and prepared to succeed. We are proud to be investing in our young people by increasing access to important summer meals.”

The Summer Nutrition Programs — which include the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program — provide free meals and snacks to children 18 and under at sites in low-income communities or that serve primarily low-income children. Sites can be located at schools, parks, recreation centers, housing complexes, Indian reservations, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, houses of worship, camps, summer school, libraries, and other places where children congregate. Most summer meal sites provide educational, enrichment, or recreational activities that keep children learning, active, and safe when school is not in session.

These programs address a critical need in **STATE**, where **#** in **#** children⁵ live in food insecure households. Summer meals contribute to children’s healthy growth and development by providing them with nutritious meals and snacks over the summer months, a time when children can be more at risk for hunger and weight gain.

To find a summer meal site near you, call 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish) or text “Summer Meals” to 97779. Families can search for the nearest site near them using USDA’s Summer Site Finder: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/summerfoodrocks>. **(Note: Replace USDA tools with state maps/hotlines if available.)**

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⁵State food insecurity data: <http://www.frac.org/research/resource-library/state-of-the-states-profiles>

Appendix 5:

Sample Summer Meals Public Service Announcements

- Hello, this is Governor **NAME**. Did you know that there are meal sites across **STATE** serving healthy, free meals alongside programming for children 18 and under this summer? Snacks and meals are available at no cost to families all summer long. No registration is required. Families can find meal sites near them by calling 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish), or by texting “Summer Meals” to 97779.
 - Hello, this is Governor **NAME**. Let’s make sure every child in **STATE** returns to school this fall healthy and ready to learn. This summer, your child can visit one of the many summer meal sites across the state that are serving free meals and organizing activities at no cost. No registration is required. Families can find meal sites near them by calling 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish), or by texting “Summer Meals” to 97779.
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Appendix 6:

Sample Social Media Posts

- Did you know that free summer meals are available to all children and teens 18 and under in **STATE**? To find the nearest summer meal site, call 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish), or text “Summer Meals” to 97779.
- Hunger doesn’t take a vacation when the school year ends. Free summer meals are being served at locations across **STATE**. Help direct families in your community to sites near them by calling 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish), or texting “Summer Meals” to 97779.