

Rural Hunger in America: SUMMER MEALS

The Summer Nutrition Programs can fill the hunger gap that exists during summer break for millions of low-income children in rural communities. Pairing summer meals with summer programs addresses the loss in learning that too many low-income children experience over the summer months. Children are nourished and ready to learn when they return to school. The Summer Nutrition Programs, which include the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Seamless Summer Option through the National School Lunch Program, provide federal funding to summer programs operating in low-income areas to serve meals and snacks to children 18 and under during the summer months when school is not in session. SFSP sites can also qualify using census data. Schools, community and recreation centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, faith-based groups, and other organizations that offer educational and enrichment activities can serve as a summer site or sponsor other summer sites.

In rural areas across America, the Summer Nutrition Programs:

- **Reduce food insecurity for students that rely on free and reduced-price school meals.** Rural households are more likely to experience food insecurity than households in metropolitan areas.
- **Support rural students' health and wellness.** Children living in rural areas have 26 percent greater odds of obesity compared to urban children.¹ Summer meals provide nutritious meals and programs that keep children active.



Only one in seven children who ate a free or reduced-price school lunch during the 2015-2016 school year were reached by the Summer Nutrition Programs in July 2016.

Source: FRAC's *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation*, 2017.

- **Draw families and students into enrichment programs.** Sixty-nine percent of rural parents surveyed in the Afterschool Alliance's report *The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities* reported that an enrichment program providing healthy snacks or meals was very important in their selection of a program, nine percentage points higher than parents who do not live in a rural area (60 percent).²
- **Help boost summer learning.** Summer learning loss leaves children academically behind when they return to school after a summer break. It affects all children, however, the income level of a family along with the availability of programming can determine how great the impact is.³ Summer learning loss hits low-income children harder than their high-income peers, but combining quality summer programs with nutritious meals can help reverse the negative effects of learning loss.

¹ Johnson James Allen III and Johnson Asal Mohammadi. *Childhood Obesity*. June 2015, 11(3): 233-241. doi:10.1089/chi.2014.0085

² Afterschool Alliance. (2016). *America After 3PM Special Report: The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities*. http://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/Afterschool_in_Rural_Communities.pdf.

³ Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Olson, L. S. (2007). Summer learning and its implications: Insights from the Beginning School Study. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 114, 11-32

■ **Allow summer programs to stretch their budgets.**

When federal nutrition dollars are used for meals, program dollars from other sources that would have been spent on food can be used to serve additional children or improve program quality.

- **Support working families.** Seventy-two percent of rural parents agree that summer programs — which are linked to summer meal programs — help working parents keep their jobs.⁴

Did You Know?

- You can serve a breakfast and a lunch to children giving them the most nutrition possible and drawing in more nutrition funding for your organization. Think about moving your breakfast meals service to later in the morning to accommodate children who might sleep in during the summer months. Lunch can be served later in the afternoon or consider doing an evening supper instead.
- You can operate a mobile meal program—a winning strategy many rural areas use to reach more children in more locations. Consider partnering with your library’s book mobile program to serve meals at the library book mobile stops.
- You can serve summer meals on weekends. The meal programs are not just for the weekdays. Children need meals on the weekends too. Connect with weekend sports leagues and faith-based groups to bring meals to children on the weekends.
- You can get data on how your state ranks in terms of access to summer meals. Check out FRAC’s annual report, [Hunger Doesn’t Take a Vacation](#).

Strategies to Increase Summer Meals Participation

The following key strategies can help more rural communities overcome barriers to participating in the Summer Nutrition Programs:

- 1) Increase federal and state funding for summer programs.** In rural communities, three children are waiting to get into programs for every child enrolled. An effective way to increase participation in summer meals is to increase the public (federal, state, and local) and private funding to operate programs in low-income communities. The federal dollars available through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers play an important role in supporting programs, but do not come close to meeting the need.
- 2) Identify community resources.** Work with the community and families to maximize existing resources in rural areas to expand the reach of summer meals. Libraries, faith-based groups, 4-H, universities and community colleges are just some examples of groups that may be able to provide space, programming, transportation and other support to Summer Nutrition Programs. USDA Rural Development, for example, 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.
- 3) Increase rural school districts serving summer meals.** Rural school districts should provide summer meals at schools or in areas with 50 percent or more of the students certified for free or reduced-price school meals. If rural schools are unable to meet the eligibility threshold for summer meals, schools can use census data. While school districts often operate summer school and other informal enrichment activities, this is not always the case in rural areas due to budget cuts and longer travel distances that may make it harder for students to get to school-based summer programs. In areas without structured programming, schools and other community partners should work together to reduce barriers facing rural children. For example, schools can keep some of their buses in service during the summer.

⁴Afterschool Alliance. (2014). America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand. <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/>.





4) Build awareness. Many program providers, school administrators and families do not know that summer meals are available, or if they do, stigma may surround the meals. Schools, youth program providers, and other summer programs should inform families that meals are available and provide accurate information about the program. Program providers can advertise meal service on outreach materials that go home with students and can partner to host an open house or kick-off event that highlights both meal service and programming.

5) Reduce eligibility limitations. Summer meal sites must be located in the service area of a school with at least 50 percent of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals or qualify through census data. This threshold disproportionately limits low-income children's access to healthy meals in rural (and suburban areas) that often lack the same concentrations of poverty as urban areas. Lowering the threshold for the Summer Meal Program to 40 percent would ensure that more children in low-income communities across the country receive the

healthy summer nutrition they need. The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization will provide an opportunity to advocate for this lower threshold.

6) Support Summer EBT. Summer EBT provides low-income families with children, a monthly benefit on a debit-card to purchase food at stores in their communities during the summer months. Summer EBT is a complement to traditional summer meal program and is beneficial in rural areas where meal programs may not be available. Summer EBT is currently available in Connecticut, Delaware, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and the Chickasaw and Cherokee nations. Providing additional federal funding to Summer EBT would ensure that more children in rural areas have access to the food they need.

When school lets out, millions of low-income children in rural communities lose access to the school breakfasts, lunches and afterschool snacks and meals they receive during the regular school year. Increasing participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs in rural areas is a winning strategy to help fill this nutrition gap and feed children who might otherwise go hungry.

This fact sheet is part of a series on rural hunger developed by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) with the support of Smithfield Foods. FRAC and Smithfield Foods have teamed up to create the Rally Against Rural Hunger initiative to raise awareness about rural hunger and to connect eligible people across the country with federal food assistance programs so they may get the nutrition they need for their health and well-being.