

Getting Good Nutrition to Children During the Summer: Tips for Increasing Participation in the Simplified Summer Food Program

1. What is the Simplified Summer Food Program

The Simplified Summer Food Program is a federal child nutrition program that provides funding for meals and snacks served to children age 18 and younger during the summer or the extended breaks of year-round schools. The Simplified Summer Food Program eliminates the complicated accounting rules. The new Simplified rules require significantly less paperwork and give all sponsors the maximum federal reimbursement rate for each meal and snack served. Until 2008, Simplified was available only in select states. The Simplified rules now are available nationwide, which creates an exciting new opportunity to increase the number of children who have access to nutritious food when school is not in session.

Simplified Summer Food Basics

Schools, local government agencies, such as the city parks and recreation department and the county health department, and private nonprofit organizations, such as food banks, YMCA's, and religious organizations can sponsor the Simplified Summer Food Program. Sponsors have an agreement with the state child nutrition agency and are fiscally responsible for operating the program. The sponsor is reimbursed for the meals that it serves to children.

A sponsor can feed children at numerous sites throughout the community. Sites can include swimming pools, schools, summer programs, community centers, parks, beaches, churches, mosques, synagogues, low-income housing complexes and other locations where children congregate during the summer.

A site qualifies either as an open or an enrolled site. An open site is located in a low-income area where 50 percent or more of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. The site is then open to all the children in the community (open restricted sites are open sites that limit or restrict participation for reasons of safety, security, or control). An enrolled site only provides meals to children enrolled in the program. An enrolled site qualifies if it is located in a low-income area or if at least half of the children enrolled in the program are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

Summer camps and sites serving primarily migrant children also can participate in the Simplified Summer Food Program and can provide up to three meals a day. Summer camps are reimbursed only for the meals served to children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Sites serving primarily migrant children must be certified by a migrant organization.

2. How to Begin Working to Increase Participation

Efforts to increase participation in the program need to focus on three areas: enlisting sponsors, increasing the number of sites, and making sure that children and their families know about the availability of the program. Without sponsors in the community operating accessible sites, children cannot participate in the program. In addition, it is necessary to let children and parents know that the program is available and the location of sites in the community. Otherwise, they will be unable to participate.

The Simplified Summer Food Program provides an exciting new way to recruit sponsors. The promise of less administrative work and the full reimbursement amount offers the opportunity to recruit new sponsors, to encourage existing sponsors to serve additional sites, and to re-engage sponsors that had dropped out of the program. The state agency can identify sponsors who left the program and work with you to encourage them to come back to the program.

Before developing an outreach plan, you should evaluate summer food in your community to determine the extent to which you focus on increasing sponsors, sites, or children. It is not necessary to conduct a complex needs assessment to work on summer food. Instead, find answers to some basic questions about summer feeding in your community or state:

- ✓ Who is sponsoring summer food?
- ✓ Are there enough sites to serve the community?
- ✓ Are the sponsor(s) willing to take on additional sites?
- ✓ Are there sites that are underutilized?

- ✓ How many children participate in summer food?
- ✓ How do the summer food numbers compare to the number of children participating in free and reduced-price school meals during the school year?

The state child nutrition agency should know the answer to these questions. The answers to the preceding questions will determine whether the program is underutilized due to a lack of sponsors, a lack of sites, a lack of children or a combination of the three, and will help to direct your work to expand the program. The United States Department of Agriculture is encouraging states to increase participation in summer food. Many state agencies are working hard to promote Simplified Summer Food and can be valuable partners so discuss your plans with them. Collaborating with the state agency will help strengthen your outreach efforts. Many have useful materials—flyers, brochures, and posters—that you can use instead of developing your own.

Below are steps to take to increase participation by sponsors, sites, and children as well as a typical state/community timeline. Since states have different deadlines, you should check with your state child nutrition agency and adjust the timing of your efforts to increase participation in summer food accordingly. In order to accomplish some of the outreach steps, it is necessary to plan and to put things into place much earlier than when the outreach activity needs to occur.

At the end of the summer, you can hold a meeting with the state agency and sponsors to discuss how the outreach efforts went and make plans for the next year.

3. Action Steps for Advocates: What to do in January and February to Enlist New Sponsors

- ✓ Contact the state child nutrition agency to find out its timeline and its plan to expand Simplified Summer Food so your efforts are complementary. Many states may want to be included in all or some of your outreach efforts.
- ✓ Identify eligible areas that need additional sponsors. The state agency has information on schools serving low-income areas and on the sites sponsors serve. In looking at this information, locate areas that have poverty, but are not being served by a sponsor or are being served by a small sponsor with limited capacity to operate additional sites.
- ✓ Recruit potential sponsors by meeting with the school district, the city/county government, or large private nonprofits. Some of the local government agencies that you should meet with are the parks and recreation department, the city department of human, health or community services, and the mayor's office. Some large nonprofits to consider meeting with include: the United Way, the local food bank, the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club, your local community center, religious institutions, and any others that are serving the children in your community. At the meeting, you should tell them about the need and the benefits of the Simplified Summer Food Program. It can be helpful to develop a fact sheet prior to these meetings which includes information on the number of children in the community receiving free and reduced-price school meals, the number of children participating in summer food, and the funding that the program could bring to the community.
- ✓ Discuss with potential sponsors any possible barriers to participation and be ready to assist them in overcoming them. For example, a parks and recreation department may be interested in sponsoring the program, but may not know where to get the food. Be ready to help the sponsor think through these issues and to provide names of potential vendors, such as the local school district, the community kitchen, or a private vendor.
- ✓ Promote Simplified Summer Food to potential sponsors through existing networks and associations, such as the state school food service association, the state association of principals, the recreation and park association, the state school age care association, and the child care resource and referral agency. Many of these groups have their own newsletters, websites, and email list-serves that can post information about summer food.
- ✓ Attend the state's sponsor training. At the training, sponsors will learn about the paperwork and other requirements for Simplified Summer Food and receive technical assistance on how to operate the program. The training is an opportunity for you to learn more about the program requirements and to meet the sponsors. It is important to have a good relationship with the sponsors, because you'll be working closely with them on

increasing the number of sites and children served. You also can ask the state to let you do a presentation on how important summer food is in your community for children's nutrition, health, and safety.

- ✓ Afterschool snack sponsors can make great Simplified Summer Food sponsors, because many operate programs for children year-round. Talk with the state agency about the best way to recruit afterschool snack sponsors into summer food.

4. Action Steps for Advocates: What to do in March and April to Increase Sites

- ✓ In order to increase the number of sites, there has to be a sponsor that is willing to take on additional sites. Meet with sponsors to discuss their capacity and their ability to serve more sites, as well as what interested sites need to do to sign up with the sponsor. The sponsor may have a form it wants sites to fill out and return to them or they may want the site to call them directly.
- ✓ Once you have a sponsor that is willing to take on additional sites, recruiting those sites is relatively easy compared to recruiting a sponsor. Basically, you are offering the site free food while asking little in return. The site is usually required to attend a site training that outlines their responsibilities in storing and serving the meals and recording the number of meals that are served (the meal counts). FRAC's Simplified Summer Food Outreach Toolkit includes a fact sheet for potential summer food sites that outlines the benefits and responsibilities of being a site.
- ✓ Identify locations in low-income areas where children congregate during the summer, such as summer programs, community centers, swimming pools, parks, low-income housing complexes, and churches, and connect these sites to a sponsor through the process you have outlined with the sponsor. Many communities have existing networks or associations of service providers, which can be good partners in promoting summer food. They can help inform providers in the community about the opportunity to become a summer food site. Also, service providers often know where the children in their community spend their summer time.
- ✓ Promote the opportunity to be a site through the existing networks of child and youth servicing organizations that you worked with to recruit sponsors through their existing newsletters and list-serves.
- ✓ Work through local grant-makers such as the Community Foundation and the United Way, to identify programs that could be summer food sites. Many of these local funders provide grants to children and youth servicing programs. They have databases of these programs for mailings and can organize meetings of their grantees for you to promote Simplified Summer Food.
- ✓ Be ready to provide technical support to sites to overcome barriers. For example, a swimming pool may be a great location, but it would require staff to hand out the meals, to make sure the children eat at the site, and to take the meal count. Link this site to the local youth employment program.

5. Action Steps: What to do in May and June to Increase the Number of Children Participating

- ✓ Develop eye-catching flyers, brochures, and posters (or use materials developed by FRAC or the state child nutrition agency) that can be distributed or hung throughout the community. Flyers can be handed out and posters can be hung at churches, community and cultural centers, low-income housing complexes, WIC clinics, Food Stamp/Medicaid/TANF offices, job training programs, and restaurants and stores that have community bulletin boards. Posters also can be hung on buses and trains, and bus and train stations.
- ✓ Set up a summer food hotline that families can call to locate the nearest summer food site. This may take time to develop, but it can have a dramatic impact on participation when there are numerous summer food sites in a community. Some communities already have a 211 hotline that links families to emergency resources, which may be able to provide referrals to summer food sites. One of the benefits of using the 211 line is that it can provide information to families who need help, but are not calling specifically about summer food. The hotline has a list of open sites and links the caller to the closest site. (If there are not a lot of sites or you're working in a small community, it may be better to help individual sponsors conduct the outreach and refer families to sites.)
- ✓ Ask schools to send information on Simplified Summer Food with a list of local sites home with children at the end of the school year.

- ✓ Ask the utility company to include information about Simplified Summer Food in its May bill.
- ✓ Work with school PTAs to get information on Simplified Summer Food to parents and make presentations at their meetings.
- ✓ Distribute door-knockers throughout low-income neighborhoods (door-knockers are flyers that are designed to be hung on door-knobs). Volunteers can be recruited to assist with distributing the door-knockers.
- ✓ Ask the local food bank to distribute flyers and posters on Simplified Summer Food to member agencies that can be included in food bags or hung information on walls. Pantry volunteers also can tell the people they serve about the program.
- ✓ Work with newspapers, local radio, television, and cable stations to promote the program through a Public Service Announcement, interviews or op-ed pieces.
- ✓ Work with local movie theatres to have a summer food slide shown at the start of movies.
- ✓ Hold a summer food kick-off, which provides the opportunity to promote the program and to get press coverage. They are usually held at summer food sites, which create good photo opportunities for the press, and many anti-hunger advocates turn it into a fun event for the children. You can invite local celebrities and elected officials to increase the energy of the event.