



Insight

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Summer Food Service Program Sponsors Identify Barriers to Participation and Support Community Partnerships

O In 1968, Congress recognized that there were children in low-income communities who were not afforded nutritious meals during the summer months when school was not in session. To address this concern, Congress created the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Each SFSP site is operated by an SFSP sponsor, who is typically a Local Education Authority (LEA), a government agency, or a non-profit private sponsor. The sponsor is financially responsible for the operation of the program and assures that all protocol is followed. SFSP sponsors receive reimbursements on a per-meal basis from the State agency that oversees the program.

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W In an attempt to increase sponsors' participation in the SFSP, Richard Lugar (R-IN) proposed the Lugar Summer Food Pilot. In 2001, this pilot allowed 13 states to operate under a program called the Simplified

Summer Food Program, which simplified the financial and administrative paperwork associated with the SFSP. A second program, the Seamless Summer Food Waiver, was created to allow food service programs in school districts to run the Summer Food Service Program as a continuation of the National School Lunch Program, instead of recreating accounting methods in the summer.

Although the Simplified Summer Food Program has increased participation by sponsors, the Seamless Summer Food Waiver has had a minimal effect on participation. Additionally, there is no research to date that explores the benefits and barriers to a sponsor's participation in the SFSP. To address this issue, the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), Applied Research Division created a study to evaluate the SFSP

sponsor's perception of the benefits and barriers related to operating the program and to assess practices used by sponsors to increase participation by eligible children.

Phase I of the research involved 21 telephone interviews where state agency directors and SFSP sponsors were asked questions regarding benefits and barriers to a sponsor's participation and factors influencing the participation by eligible children. Phase II of the research included the development of a questionnaire that was sent to 803 SFSP sponsors in the southeast region of the United States. Seven primary questions, each with a set of sub-questions, were included in the survey. A total of 316 completed surveys were used in the data analysis.

Providing nutritious meals to children in low-income communities was seen as the most important benefit of the program. Sponsors believed the large volume of paperwork was the primary reason an individual would not want to start a program and the primary reason a sponsor would



leave/discontinue a program. The most crucial resource in starting and operating a program was having adequate and appropriate staff to help with meal production. Most respondents strongly agreed that a primary reason for lack of participation by eligible children was insufficient transportation to the feeding sites. Advertising programs in areas frequented by families of eligible children and having an activity associated with the program were seen as the most beneficial means to increase participation by children.

In order to increase the number of individuals sponsoring SFSP sites, resources need to be enhanced and made available to support the SFSP sponsors. In addition to providing training to the sponsors in the spring prior to the start of the program, the state should serve as a resource to help resolve problems and clarify any issues faced by the sponsor.

Many sponsors found that by working through the community, they could increase student participation in the program. Sponsors advertised other activities as the primary function and the meals were offered as a part of the activity. These activities ranged from arts and crafts to physical activity, and utilized the services of local chapters of the YCMA, The Boys and Girls club, and many other organizations. Not only do these activities provide academic, physical and artistic enrichment for these children, but they also serve to detract from the perceived stigma that is unfortunately often attached to feeding programs.

Research Objectives

- To identify barriers, practices, and other issues that prevent eligible children from participating in summer feeding programs
- To determine solutions/best practices to help communities overcome the identified barriers, thus, increasing access to SFSPs
- To provide school districts and local communities with techniques for increasing participation in SFSPs

METHODS

PHASE I

Telephone Interviews

Nine state agency child nutrition program directors who oversaw the SFSP were contacted by telephone. These state directors were chosen because of their level of experience and willingness to participate in the research. Directors were from states that did and did not participate in the Simplified Summer Food Program. These states included: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Oregon. After completing the telephone survey, state directors were asked to provide information on SFSP sponsors that were interested in participating in the research. A total of 12 SFSP sponsors participated in the telephone interviews.

Both state directors and program sponsors were asked the same questions. The questions focused on barriers to

participation in the SFSP program from the point of view of the program sponsor and eligible children and/or families. All responses were evaluated by two separate researchers, and trends in the responses were totaled for each question. A statistician reviewed the data and provided suggestions for development of the final questionnaire. A total of six themes emerged from the qualitative data: barriers related to a sponsor starting a program, reasons a sponsor might leave or discontinue a program, resources that are beneficial to a sponsor operating a program, benefits to children participating in the program, barriers that would prevent an eligible child from participating in the program, and methods used to increase participation in the program.

PHASE II

Survey Development

After identifying the major themes, responses related to each of these areas were tabulated. If a response had been mentioned at least six times during the telephone interview, it was included on the initial questionnaire. Responses to each of the questions were provided using a Likert-type scale that would allow the participants to strongly agree/disagree to the responses or rate the responses as not at all to extremely important. Although not identified as one of the major themes, a question was added to evaluate how strongly the sponsors would agree or disagree on the feasibility of using some of the unique methods identified to increase program participation.

This questionnaire was then reviewed by two NFSMI research scientists for wording and appropriateness. After revisions were made, the survey was sent to four state directors that served as an expert panel. In addition to answering each of the questions, the expert panel was given the opportunity to provide input on the wording and clarity of the instrument prior to being distributed to SFSP sponsors. Additionally, demographic data were added to the questionnaire to evaluate the grade level primarily served, location of the program, reason for conducting a SFSP program, Simplified Summer Food Program participation, number of years as a sponsor, number of sites sponsored, number of meals served on a daily basis, and the number of weeks the program is operated. An open ended question was developed to allow program sponsors to describe innovative techniques they had used to enhance participation at feeding sites.

While the expert panel was reviewing the instrument, state directors from the nine southeast states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) were contacted and a list of all SFSP sponsors in their states was requested. Additionally, state sponsors in Louisiana and Oregon were contacted, and a list of twenty-five sponsors from each state was requested for the pilot survey.

After receiving responses from the expert panel, a pilot questionnaire was developed, using Optiscan. This

program allows for responses to be “bubbled in” so data may be scanned and directly loaded into a statistical program. Fifty pilot questionnaires were sent out to SFSP sponsors in Louisiana and Oregon. Ten questionnaires were returned and analyzed for validity.

The final questionnaire was sent to 803 SFSP sponsors in the southeast region. To preserve the anonymity of all respondents, no identifying codes were placed on the questionnaires. Participants were given three weeks to return the completed surveys.

In addition to the mailed out survey, telephone interviews were conducted using the same set of questions for both state agency directors and SFSP sponsors.

Data Analysis

Surveys were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS Version 12.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics included means, standard deviations, and frequencies of total responses. T-test was used to evaluate differences in responses based on participation in the Simplified Summer Food Program. Qualitative descriptions of techniques used to increase participation were summarized and tabulated to identify themes within the data. No significant differences in mean scores for each question were found between those sponsors that participated in the Simplified Summer Food Program and those who did not.

FINDINGS

Telephone Interviews

Participants stated that a lack of understanding of what is involved to run the program was the biggest challenge for starting a SFSP program. Having adequate and appropriate staff and established partnerships in the community were identified as primary resources that could be used to help a sponsor start a program in a district where summer feeding has never been offered. Participants believed the Simplified Summer Food Program would help increase overall participation by eligible children. However, high overhead costs and the amount of paperwork required to run the program were seen as reasons that a sponsor might leave or not choose to start a program. Lack of knowledge about the program and lack of transportation to the feeding sites were seen as the main barriers to participation by eligible children.

Survey Findings

Study participants indicated several barriers to operating and managing a SFSP. Respondents most strongly agreed that there is too much paperwork involved in starting a SFSP. Respondents also rated this reason as the primary cause for a sponsor leaving or discontinuing a program. Although the majority of the participants did not agree that the cost of starting a SFSP was too high (70%), more than 70% felt that having funding prior to the start of the program was very important or extremely important.

The most important resources for a sponsor operating a summer program were having adequate and appropriate staff to help with meal production and having an adequate facility for preparation of the meals. Forty-seven percent believed that training manuals and/or workshop in management and finances related to the operation of the program would be extremely beneficial. Utilizing volunteers in the community to run the program (rather than having to pay staff) was not seen as important, even though one of the state directors believed this was the only way that she could operate the program.

When asked about the barriers that might affect participation by eligible children, most respondents strongly agreed that eligible children do not have transportation to the feeding sites. Similarly, 38.9% agreed or strongly agreed that this was a reason a sponsor might not want to start a program or a reason for leaving/discontinuing a program. Although mentioned several times during the telephone interviews, 66.8% of sponsors did not agree that participation was hindered by the perceived stigma attached to receiving free meals or taking handouts. It was agreed that partnering with community groups (such as The Boys and the Girls Club and the Family Y) to sponsor activities at the feeding sites was one of the most beneficial ways to promote participation in the SFSP. Lastly, advertising programs in areas frequented by families of eligible children and having an activity associated with the program were seen as most important methods to increase participation.

Suggestions for Increasing Participation of Eligible Children

One hundred and thirty-nine participants described ways they attempt to improve participation at the feeding sites. The primary recommendation was to provide activities around meal times. The second most frequently used technique was advertising through the community. Other recommendations were to provide prizes for participation, provide quality food that the children enjoyed, and to increase parental involvement.

Many sponsors utilized enrichment and recreational activities as a means of increasing participation. The activities served as the primary means for getting the children to the site, and the meals were offered as part of the activity (Child Nutrition Fact Sheet, 2005; Terry, 1980). Some suggested activities included: physical education, guest speakers, reading (utilizing the services of a book mobile), TV and movies, games, field trips, Bible classes, and arts and crafts. To economically provide a variety of activities, sponsors worked within their local communities by partnering with other community programs, such as the YMCA, summer camps, National Youth Sports Program, day care centers, independent baby sitters, The Boys and the Girls Club, Bible camps, and home day cares. Sponsors also suggested bringing in guest speakers

The Seven Primary Survey Questions - Top Three Responses with Means and Standard Deviations

Question	Mean ^a	SD
1. In your opinion, how would a sponsor who has left the program rate the following reasons for not wanting to start another program in the future?		
a. There is too much paperwork involved in starting a SFSP	3.7	1.4
b. They did not understand what was involved in starting a program	3.4	1.4
c. They did not understand the financial component of SFSP	3.4	1.3
2. Rate the following reasons that a sponsor may give for leaving or discontinuing a program:		
a. Too much paperwork is involved in operating a program	3.7	1.4
b. The overhead costs of running a program are too high	3.3	1.4
c. Transportation of the children to the sites was inadequate	3.1	1.4
3. With regards to participation, how would you rate each of the following items that might affect participation by eligible children?		
a. Eligible children do not have transportation to the feeding sites	3.6	1.4
b. Children would prefer to have hot food on a daily basis	3.1	1.4
c. Community members/families do not know about the program	3.0	1.4
4. Rate each of the following methods used to increase participation in the SFSP in your area:		
a. Partnering with community groups to sponsor activities	4.1	1.2
b. Utilizing volunteers to teach enrichment classes	3.8	1.3
c. Getting local merchants to give prizes as incentives for attendance	3.6	1.4
5. Rate the importance of each of the following resources that would be beneficial to a sponsor operating a SFSP:		
a. Having adequate/appropriate staff to help with meal production	4.5	.8
b. Having an adequate facility for preparation of the meals	4.5	.9
c. Having training manuals/workshops related to program operation	4.2	1.0
6. Rate the importance of each of the following benefits of the SFSP:		
a. Nutritious food for children who would not have food in summer	4.9	.5
b. Provides social interaction/positive environment for the children	4.4	.9
c. Helps families in meeting their food budgets	4.3	1.0
7. Rate the importance of each of the following methods to increase your participation in the SFSP in your area:		
a. Advertising the program in areas frequented by families	4.5	.8
b. Having an activity associated with the program	4.4	.9
c. Utilizing media to advertise the program (TV, newspapers, flyers)	4.3	1.0

a 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree; 1=Not at All Important, 5=Extremely Important

for the children from police stations, fire departments, and other local services.

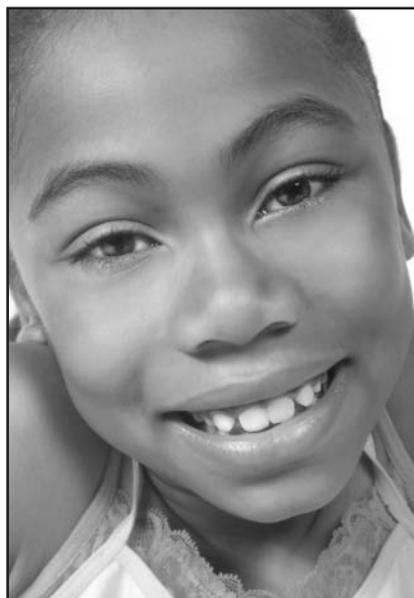
The second most common technique to increase participation was through advertising. Sponsors suggested economical and effective methods on a community level, such as advertising at grocery stores and churches, putting up flyers in Laundromats, and through community announcements in the newspaper. Advertising through flyers, brochures, and posters appeared to be the primary method for informing parents of eligible children. Often, these flyers were sent home with the children at the end of the school year or sent with utility bills. Some sponsors posted information about the SFSP in areas frequently visited by families with eligible children, such as food banks, churches, or local governmental agencies that provide assistance to low-income families (Getting Good Nutrition, 2005; School Nutrition Programs, 2005).

Reaching out to the community also helped increase participation by addressing the issue of lack of transportation for children to and from feeding sites. One sponsor used a school bus to pick up local children at day care or from babysitters in homes. Another sponsor found a driver of a Bookmobile who would take packed lunches in coolers to children who could not get transportation to the feeding site.

Providing prizes was frequently mentioned. Sponsors believed recognizing children for attendance was an effective way to encourage them and others to participate on a regular basis. One sponsor indicated that prizes were given to those children who participated in at least 85% of the days served.

Other more innovative methods were suggested as ways to improve participation. One sponsor reported that she fed the parents of the children and did not count them as part of the program. Academic enrichment in Reading and Math was provided by another sponsor as a way to improve participation.

Some sponsors believed that simply providing hot, high quality foods was a good way to increase participation. They believed that if children had an enjoyable meal to look forward to, this would be plenty of incentive to come. (More than half of the sponsors in the study said they decided to participate in the program because they believed there was a genuine need to help feed the children in their area.)



PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION

Sponsors identified too much paperwork as the main barrier to an individual participating as a sponsor in the SFSP. However, only 34% of our sample operated under the Simplified Summer Food Program, and this may have influenced this conclusion. If more sponsors were educated about the simplified program, perhaps the perceived barrier of too much paperwork would be reduced.

In order to increase the number of individuals sponsoring SFSP sites, resources need to be enhanced and be made available to support the SFSP sponsors. In 1980, S. G. Terry found that providing additional resources and training to SFSP sponsors was key to improving participation and enhancing management of the program. In addition to providing training to the sponsors in the spring prior to the start of the program, the state served as a resource to help resolve problems and clarify issues.

The ways to increase participation mentioned by the sponsors are similar to the recommendations made by other researchers and the USDA. It appears that good advertising in communities/ areas visited by families of eligible children is most often used to increase the number of children participating in the program. Sponsors emphasized that working with the community to coordinate extra activities with the feedings helped increase participation.

For more information on this study, you may find the complete report posted on the NFSMI Web site, at www.nfsmi.org, or you may also dial 1-800-321-3051 for additional assistance.

For More Information

Child nutrition fact sheet: Summer Food Service Program. (2005). Food Research and Action Center. Washington, DC.

Getting good nutrition to children during the summer: Tips for boosting participation in summer food. (2005). Food Research and Action Center. Washington, DC.

Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer nutrition status report. (2005). Food Research and Action Center. Washington, DC.

Tasse, T., & Ohls, J. (2003). Reaching more hungry children: The Seamless Summer Food Waiver. *Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.*, 1-4.

Terry, S. G. (1980). Summer feeding: Maryland's success story. *School Food Service Journal*, 34-39.



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Information about this and other topics may be obtained by contacting the

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