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Innovative Marketing Strategies and Delivery Methods Used in Effective Summer Food Service Programs

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Innovative Marketing Strategies and Delivery Methods Used in Effective Summer Food Service Programs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) was created in 1968 as a federal nutrition program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to assist participants in the provision of meals to preschool and school-aged children after the school year has ended. Through the SFSP, school districts and sponsoring organizations provide free meals to more than 3.9 million eligible, low-income children during the summer months as a way to combat childhood hunger. There are some challenges that have been documented that hamper children's participation in the SFSP, and school districts and sponsoring agencies have been implementing innovative strategies to sustain and increase participation in the program. To examine the marketing models and innovative delivery models of SFSP best practices, the Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division (ICN, ARD) conducted a two-phase project to examine if instruments created to explore innovative strategies and delivery models within the SFSP could capture pertinent data that describes the success and issues that impact the SFSP.

The ICN, ARD research study assessed the current marketing strategies and delivery methods of the SFSP. The study's protocol included the development of case study instruments, researcher training, and analysis protocol that were piloted by an ICN, ARD research coordinator. Following the research design's embedded, replicable, multiple-case, case-study protocol, the communications format, focus group and observation procedures, and instruments

were tested by the ICN, ARD research coordinator, and revised for training researchers for case study site selection and data collection. The protocol was then revised for Phase II of the study.

A team of researchers was trained to follow the pilot protocol to collect, analyze, and report qualitative data from SFSP sponsors across the United States (U.S.). Four research teams were selected from a pool of applicants to receive a research award for attending a training session on how to conduct the case study site visits and on how to collect and analyze data from USDA regions across the country. Each team was instructed to follow the embedded, replicable, multi-case, case study protocol to select and arrange visits to four SFSP sponsors. Researchers' training included guidance through a systematic approach to conduct or assess the following:

- Interviews or focus groups with SFSP sponsors and partners;

- Behavioral observation procedures to document marketing and SFSP delivery methods, successes, and challenges; and

- Partners' and stakeholders' roles and responsibilities at each site.

All four research teams completed the collection of qualitative data from 14 sites across the U.S., and then attended a debriefing session with the ICN, ARD research coordinator to discuss research findings and to discuss reporting methodology. Research results included the identification of successful marketing strategies for families with children and community stakeholders through various marketing strategies. Barriers identified in this study were consistent with other research findings, including few resources and funds for expanding programs, a lack of marketing strategies to meet the needs of unique SFSPs, time, and staffing. Participants in this study shared best practices implemented to overcome barriers and challenges of expanding, operating, and evaluating successful SFSPs. The data gathered in this study could

be used to expand innovative SFSP strategies, and to develop a resource for sponsors to assess

their programs.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood hunger is a primary issue that plagues households of many children in the United States. The food insecurity rate is 15.4% in America, and more than 16.2 million children are affected by issues of inadequate food sources within their households that may lead to hunger. Child nutrition programs, such as the National School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Programs, provide meals to millions of children during the school year. However, many children lose access to nutritious meals during the summer months when schools are closed (Gundersen, Engelhard, Satoh, & Waxman, 2014). Without these programs in the summer months, household food budgets generally increase during this time due to the lack of school-based meals. Thus, food insecurity increases for many low-income children in America during the summer and holidays (Gordon, et al., 2003).

Childhood obesity and the lack or accessibility to nutritious food is another challenge that families with children face during the summer months. Meals served in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provide nutritious meals to children who may not otherwise receive one. Many SFSP sponsors provide opportunities for learning, social engagement, and physical and nutrition education enrichment. However, advocates believe that SFSPs in rural and remote areas are still limited, and that more innovative approaches are needed to implement, sustain, and increase the enrollment of eligible children who could benefit from the program (Hopkins, et al., 2016).

The SFSP is a federal nutrition program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to assist participants in the provision of meals to preschool and school-aged children after the school year has ended. Created in 1968, the SFSP and a food service program for children in SFSP sponsors were amended into the National School Lunch Act as the Special

Food Service Program for Children, serving as a pilot program to provide meals to children when school was not in session (USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, 2014a). By 1975, the SFSP and SFSP sponsors (now known as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)) were formed into two separate programs to meet children's unique nutritional needs. Since that period, the SFSP has endured many challenges, but remains to be the largest federally-funded program, providing opportunities to sponsors to offer summer activity programs with child nutrition programs. (USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, 2014b).

From 1975 to 1986, additional provisions were added to SFSP to combat challenges as participation increased. The new provisions required sponsors to submit program budgets and complete requirements that demonstrate their abilities to administer the SFSP, and placed limitations and restrictions on sponsors to curtail abuse and inefficiency of the program. Subsequent changes in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 1989 expanded sponsorship back to private nonprofit organizations, and extended State Agencies' outreach, training, and monitoring of sponsors. Additional public policy changes that have taken place up until the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-296) have removed limitations and provided more flexibility to assist sponsors with expanding their reach to serve more eligible children (USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, 2013).

Recent data from 2015 show that school districts and/or sponsoring organizations provided free meals to more than 3.2 million eligible, low-income children during the summer months as a way to combat childhood hunger (Food Research & Action Center, 2016). Although there are challenges that have been documented that hamper children's participation in the SFSP, school districts and sponsoring agencies have been implementing innovative strategies to sustain and increase participation in the program. Therefore, the Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied

Research Division conducted a two-phase project to examine if instruments created to explore innovative marketing strategies and delivery models within the SFSP could capture pertinent data that describes the success and issues that impact the SFSP.

Research Objectives

The goal of this research project was to explore innovative marketing strategies and delivery models within the SFSP, and to capture pertinent data that described the success and issues that impacted the program. In order to accomplish this goal, the objectives of this research study were to collect data that:

- Identified the various avenues sponsoring organizations are providing meals and nutrition education via the SFSP;

- Identified the perceptions of sponsors and food service staff operating the SFSP; and

- Identified the issues, barriers, and plausible resolutions that affect the SFSP participation.

METHODOLOGY

The Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division (ICN, ARD) conducted a research study to explore innovative marketing strategies and delivery models within the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and to capture pertinent data that describes the success and issues that impact the program. The research objectives and goals were addressed by utilizing research data and qualitative research procedures (embedded, multiple-case, case-study methodology) to identify SFSP marketing strategies and delivery models. Data were collected at regional case study sites to identify these factors and SFSP-related behaviors across the country.

This research study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the ICN, ARD research coordinator developed and piloted the study's qualitative research protocol, data collection instruments, and training procedures for replicating research procedures. Information from the pilot was reviewed by the ICN, ARD research coordinator, and by experts in the field who provided suggestions and recommendations for revision to both of the instruments and to the researchers' training, data collection, and analysis protocols. In the second phase of the study, four research teams located at universities across the country were trained to identify and conduct case study site visits in diverse SFSP settings, such as schools, parks and recreation sites, religious organizations, public libraries, and non-profit organizations. The research team conducted case study site visits that included collecting qualitative data through interviews with administrators and personnel of sponsoring organizations. Researchers also observed SFSP activities through components identified by the ICN, ARD research coordinator in the pilot study to confirm statements about marketing strategies and modes of delivery. Their findings were written and audio recorded, and then analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method (Dye, et al., 2000) with another ICN, ARD researcher to report the results based upon research objectives.

Research Design

The embedded, replicable, multiple-case, case-study design with a literal replication format (Yin, 2003) was used to develop the case study protocol to guide this SFSP study. Case study methodology is a qualitative approach that has been used to describe the scope and depth of a phenomena in various settings (multiple-phase approach) using specific characteristics. The literal replication format was developed based on previous research and analysis of qualitative data to describe SFSP sponsors' perceptions and experiences implementing effective marketing and innovative program delivery strategies. The multiple-case design allows for the exploration of similarities and differences between and within data from each case using the case study instruments (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

The embedded approach described by Scholz and Tietje (2002) was selected as a part of the case study methodology to allow for more detailed inquiry and exploration. This approach also allows for data collection from multiple groups of subjects following the same research objectives, and provides a protocol for integrating qualitative data into a single research study. Following this research design, the protocols developed for this study included case study site visit communication letters; informed consent and assent forms; interview/focus group instruments for SFSP sponsors; and an observation instrument. Researchers' training and debriefing protocols and a data analysis plan were also created to ensure that all researchers collecting and analyzing data for the study were following the research methodology. The ICN, ARD research coordinator evaluated a site visit to assess that researchers were following the established research design of the study. Researchers provided periodic feedback and quarterly reports of their progress with site selection, data collection, and analysis.

Informed Consent

The ICN, ARD research coordinator followed research protocol and consent procedures established by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at The University of Southern Mississippi for the pilot and overall study. The approved Institutional Review Board application from The University of Southern Mississippi was shared with researchers so that they would follow the same research protocol, as a part of the research design's replicable case study procedures. For all research protocols, no identifying codes were used to identify participants from the pilot and case study site visits in Phase I and Phase II of this study. Participants in the research study included only those administrators and personnel of SFSP sponsoring organizations who signed consent forms.

Liaisons (representatives of the SFSP sponsoring organization) were sent copies of the confirmation e-mail letter and the informed consent information, and were asked to share with any other participants who would take part in any interviews/focus group discussions. Attendance, reading, and signing consent forms at the interviews/focus group sessions served as participants' agreement to take part in the pilot study. Confidentiality statements were provided to all participants, and they were reminded that participation in the pilot project is completely voluntary. Contact information for the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee was provided for questions or concerns on the consent forms.

Selection and Training of Researchers

A competitive "Request for Application" announcement was distributed nationwide to solicit researchers with qualitative methodology experience to partner in collecting data for this research study. Four researchers from universities across the United States were selected, and they signed a subcontract agreement to attend a training session on how to identify case study

sites, conduct site visits, and record and analyze data. The researchers also received the communications protocol and draft contact information sample documents for communicating with SFSP sponsors who serve as the liaison at each center's case study site. Additional resources were provided to researchers which included the following: a SFSP sponsors' contact letter about the site visit's purpose; information for conducting interviews/focus groups; interview/focus group questions; and the observation instrument to record SFSP activities and behaviors.

To ensure that research integrity was maintained, researchers were instructed to follow their university's research governance for contacting participants, obtaining sponsors' consent, data collection, and analysis procedures. Communication between sponsored program representatives at each university assisted in the management of the research study. Researchers provided a copy of their approval to conduct research from their Human Subjects Protection Review Committee after signing their "Memorandum of Understanding" statements, and completing their university cooperative agreement contracts.

Data Collection Instruments and Supporting Documents

The research protocols and instruments were developed using previous ICN, ARD research, literature review, and information from SFSP sponsors and experts in the field. The protocols and instruments were then reviewed by SFSP sponsors and a Child Nutrition consultant in different geographical settings, in both rural and metropolitan (urban/suburban). The questions were revised to be utilized in either individual interviews or focus group formats. The sponsors provided the feedback necessary for establishing the communications protocol between the researchers and the SFSP representatives who would serve as the liaisons for each site visit. The ICN, ARD staff and SFSP administrators also reviewed the consent, revised

interview/focus group questions, and observation forms, and confirmed the content for each. No revisions were made after the final pilot case site visit.

The case study site visit and data collection protocols were refined so that each could be used as a guide by researchers to concepts and issues in various settings. The site visit protocol included the following items:

- A letter/e-mail to the SFSP sponsor/administrator and/or school authority (for school-based sites) to request their participation in the study; and

- Summer Food Service Program staff or partner representative consent forms.

The data collection protocols included the following items:

- A demographic form;

- An interview/focus group questionnaire for SFSP sponsors; and

- An observation form.

Interview/Focus Group Questions for Summer Food Service Program Sponsors, Summer Food Service Program Staff, and Partner Representatives

Sixteen questions were developed from the objectives and goals of the study to capture SFSP sponsors' responses related to their SFSP program and their perceptions about the program. The information collected from SFSP sponsors described their experiences planning and implementing the SFSP requirements, which included the following: general information about their SFSP format, perceptions about the program, SFSP planning, marketing, partnerships, benefits, and barriers. Questions one through four, eight, nine, and 13 were designed to describe the dynamics of the SFSP sponsors' organizations:

- Question 1: "Describe your organization's SFSP format? Do you serve in the facility?"

- a. "Any satellite meals served? If so, what are your procedures for reaching children?"

- Question 2: "What is unique about your SFSP?"

  - a. "How does it differ from other programs?"

- Question 3: "How early do you begin planning for the SFSP?"

  - a. "Who is involved in the planning process?"

  - b. "Can you describe their roles?"

- Question 4: "How is your SFSP advertised or marketed?"

  - a. "Material sent home through schools"

  - b. "TV ads"

  - c. "PSA"

  - d. "Other _____"

- Question 8: "What is your current average daily participation? Is participation higher or lower than you expected?

  - a. "Do you have plans to increase?"

  - b. "How will you meet the demands for feeding more children in the summer?"

  - c. "Do you have any large variations in participation? Why do you think these variations occur?"

- Question 9: "Is your SFSP open to children who drop in or closed (limited to only the children enrolled for the program)?"

- Question 13: "Do the kids throw away a lot of food?

  - a. "What gets thrown away the most?"

Questions six and nine (question nine was also a part of the SFSP description) were developed to capture information about SFSP operations:

- Question 6: "What are the major concerns meeting the operational needs of the SFSP?

    a. "Staffing?"

    b. "Planning?

    c. "Adequate funding?'

    d. "What are you currently doing to meet the above?"

Questions seven and fifteen are related to SFSP concerns and barriers:

- Question 7: "What are the major concerns meeting the participatory needs of the SFSP?

    a. "Reaching children in areas of need?"

    b. "Community dynamics?"

    c. "Recruitment?"

    d. "Transportation?"

- Question 15: "What are the challenges to participation in the SFSP as sponsor?"

Questions 12, 14, and 16 were created to capture the SFSP administrators' perceptions about the program:

- Question 12: "Do you feel the meals meet the needs of the children served in the summer program?"

    a. "Why or why not?"

    b. "Meet children's cultural needs?"

    c. "Nutritional needs? Enough food?"

      d. "Preferences (food)?"

- Question 14: "What works well for you as an SFSP sponsor?"

- Question 16: "If you could change one thing or offer a suggestion for improving the

  SFSP, what would it be?"

        a. "Operational?"

        b. "To increase participation?"

Summer Food Service Program Observation Form

The *Behavioral Observation Form* was created to capture data describing the

characteristics of the SFSP, and observed SFSP participants' activities and behaviors which

included questions/statements related to:

- SFSP organization contact information;

        a. USDA region

        b. SFSP sponsor's name

        c. SFSP sponsor's address

- Type of feeding site;

        a. School district

        b. Religious Organization

        c. Local Government Agency

        d. Non-Profit Organization

        e. Sponsoring Organization

        f. Head Start Agency

        g. Other type of organization

- Type of meal(s) served during observation by researcher;

    a. Breakfast;

    b. Lunch;

    c. Snack;

    d. Supper;

- Mode of transportation for the participants;

    a. By the organization

    b. By parents/caregivers

    c. Children walked/biked to the site

    d. Sponsor has delivery system for satellite sites in children's communities.

- Confirm observed compliance of food components that meet SFSP meal requirements during site visit;

    a. Yes

    b. No

- Observed activities during SFSP meal service time;

    a. Summer Camp

    b. Band Camp

    c. Athletic Camp

    d. Education/Academics

    e. Arts Program

    f. Vacation Bible School

    g. Other (space is provided for researcher to describe type of other observed SFSP activity not listed)

- Confirmed observations of nutrition education at the SFSP by researcher;

    a. Yes

    b. No

- Researcher(s)' observation of children's consumption of SFSP meal;

Most children ate:

    a. All of the food components offered (100%)

    b. Most of the food components offered (at least 50% of the meal offered)

    c. Barely consumed any of the meal components (25% of the meal offered)

    d. None of the meal components (0% of the meal offered)

- Researcher(s)' observation of SFSP feeding site;

    a. Cafeteria/Dining Hall

    e. Bus

    f. Camp/Park

    g. Community Center

    h. Other (space is provided for researcher to describe type of SFSP feeding site observed)

- Researcher(s)' description of the SFSP feeding site environment;

    a. Temperature

        (i) Comfortable

        (ii) Too Hot

        (iii)Too Cold

    b. Space

        (i) Children can be seated comfortably for meals

        (ii) Not enough space for children to sit and eat

      c.   Social Environment & Safety

          (i) Children are able to wash their hands prior to meal

          (ii) Children are encouraged to try new foods

          (iii)Children are able to engage in conversation with each other

          (iv)Caregivers/Mentors/Teachers eat with the children

          (v) Activities are provided during the meal

          (vi)Food Service Staff or Site Providers practice safe food handling

              procedures (i.e., washes hands, use gloves)

Additional space was added to each question/statement for the researcher to write additional

SFSP observations.

Case Study Site Visit Protocol

The researchers were trained to select a minimum of four diverse SFSP sponsoring

organizations in at least two USDA regions. Diversity characteristics included the selection of

sites that were distinctive by type of organization, type of SFSP preparation and mode of

delivery, number of sites enrollment, geographical location (rural, metropolitan), and

racial/ethnic demographic. Since the study focused on sponsors participating in the SFSP,

researchers were instructed to make personal contacts with SFSP administrators who could serve

as liaisons. The ICN, ARD research coordinator provided sample documents for all case study

site visit protocol communications.

Information was provided to researchers to contact SFSP administrators by e-mail or

letter or phone call. The electronic request for SFSP sponsors/administrators provided the

purpose of the study; the site visit protocol; recommendations for selecting participants (SFSP

sponsors and staff); a request for a letter of support (if deemed necessary); a Human Subjects

Protection Review Committee "Memorandum of Understanding" statement; and a timeline for interviews/focus groups and observations. The researchers also included their contact information should the SFSP administrator or other site liaison have additional comments about their participation in the study. If necessary, a letter requesting the SFSP sponsors' authorization to conduct the site visit was also created for researchers to use as a template.

Once approval and letters of support were received from the SFSP sponsors, the researchers were instructed to send a confirmation e-mail to the SFSP administrator/liaison. The confirmation e-mail provided additional information for the site visit activities and the procedures for obtaining consent. The researchers conducted a follow-up phone call to the SFSP administrator to discuss the case study site visit protocol/procedures, and to clarify procedures for the site visit. An itinerary for site visit arrangements was coordinated between the SFSP administrator and the researchers to conduct the case study activities. The protocol also included information for obtaining informed consent from SFSP administrators and staff members who agreed to take part in the interviews/focus groups, and to allow researchers to observe their SFSP site activities. The structured interviews/focus groups and the observation process were scheduled to take approximately one day to complete at each site visit. Due to limitations of SFSP staff's flexibility in scheduling, the order of interviews/focus groups and observations were arranged by the liaison to accommodate the sites' daily activities.

Site Visits

Data collection using the interview/focus group protocol with SFSP administrators and/or staff, and a behavioral observation of a meal and/or SFSP activity occurred during a one-day visit in a SFSP setting for each case site. The site visits included the following research activities, in no particular order:

- Meet with the SFSP administrator/case study site liaison to discuss the scheduling of site visit activities;

- Conduct interviews/focus groups with the SFSP administrators, staff, and partner representatives (if available); and

- Complete a behavioral observation of meal service (meals, activities, type of setting, children's social interactions and consumption behaviors, mode of transportation, marketing materials, and SFSP operational procedures).

Summer Food Service Program Administrators/Staff Structured Interviews

At each site, the SFSP liaison explained the purpose of the study to their staff, who were identified as actively involved in the operations of the program (i.e., administrators, school staff where applicable, site supervisors, SFSP partners, and food service staff) prior to the researchers' site visit. The SFSP administrators and staff who agreed and were able to participate were asked to review and sign a consent form, and a researcher read an assent statement to them prior to the facilitation of interviews or focus group sessions. The assent form provided an overview of the study and participants' rights to decline any questions or cease participation without penalty. The questionnaire asked SFSP administrators and staff about their perceptions of the program's successes and challenges, and their strategies for meeting the SFSP requirements. Sponsor administrators that served as the liaison for the site visit participated in interviews and up to six SFSP staff members and community partners participated in focus groups that were conducted within a 45 minute to an hour timeframe. A *SFSP Information Form* was provided to the administrator to capture information about the characteristics of the SFSP, the children served, and the geographical location of the center (USDA region).

Summer Food Service Program Observation

The SFSP liaisons provided an overview of their SFSP and completed a *SFSP Information Form* to provide researchers with data about their organization and program operations. As a second phase of the site visit, researchers were able to observe SFSP operations and at least one meal service period and other activities. The observation procedure allowed researchers to document and confirm meal consumption, social interactions, nutrition education or other activities and behaviors performed after the structured interviews to corroborate participants' accounts of related activities.

Debriefing Session and Initial Data Synthesis and Analysis

All interview/focus group and observation data were recorded in written and electronic formats, and transcribed for analysis. Focus group data was audio recorded, and included the research teams' notes. After the case study site visit, all qualitative data were transcribed following the process provided in the researchers' training session. Each researcher was responsible for examining all raw data using several analytical strategies.

The transcripts were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method to categorize, tabulate, and cross-check responses and observations that addressed the initial purpose of the study. The *Constant Comparison Method, a Kaleidoscope of Data* by Dye, Schatz, Rosenburg, and Coleman (2000) was used, because it provided a synopsis of the data based upon the embedded, multiple-cases, case study format designed and implemented to conduct this study. This method utilizes the constant comparison methods described by Patton (1990) and Glaser and Strauss (1985) to follow the four distinct stages for categorizing and describing data:

- Comparing factors applicable to each objective captured from interview/focus group questions and observed behaviors;

- Integrating interview/focus group and observation categories and their properties;

- Delimiting theories and assumptions; and

- Writing the synopsis of data.

This comparison method has been confirmed to be an ideal method for combining inductive category coding with observations from social settings. Therefore, as the researchers record responses using instruments constructed to capture categorical objectives, the data is compared across the categories. This method also allows for continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process and feedback that describe relational aspects of the study.

Following the Dye, et al. (2000) data comparison method, thematic coding of key characteristics specific to the research objectives were analyzed from the SFSP administrators' and staff's interview/focus group notes and observations for pertinent data. The research teams combined themes from interviews/focus group and observation data for each category identified from the objectives of the study. The principal investigator from each team then met with the ICN, ARD research coordinator in a debriefing session to discuss their initial research findings, commonalties, and unique results. The researchers also made the final decisions about combining interviews/focus group and observation data; categorizing the data into individual case and research team summaries; identifying researchers' roles and responsibilities for completing the project analysis; and creating a timeline for reporting and disseminating research results. A X^2 analysis was performed on program characteristics data to detect significant differences between urban and rural programs. Each researcher then conducted a review of their data, and summited a copy of their transcripts and result summaries. The ICN, ARD research coordinator conducted the final comparative analysis of data, and sent the final copy of the results to the researchers. The information was then formatted for reporting according to the research methodology.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore innovative marketing strategies and delivery models within the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and to capture pertinent data that described the success and issues that impact the program. The information collected from this study would confirm the identification of successful marketing strategies and best practices for SFSP. Researchers for this study captured data from SFSP sponsors to provide insight into their perceptions of their SFSP regulations, benefits, partnerships and resources, program challenges and successes, and unique characteristics of SFSP. Twenty-five site visits with SFSP sponsors interviews and observation of SFSP activities were conducted between June 2015 and September 2015. SFSP sponsors included SFSP administrators, teachers, the sponsor's staff members, and cooks. The type of SFSP operations was diverse, and included for-profit and non-profit agencies, tribal SFSP sponsor, school-based programs, city/county government agencies, and Head Start centers sponsors in rural and metropolitan areas.

Researchers were able to conduct all aspects of the case study protocols in the SFSP and observe SFSP operations, meal consumption, and social interaction behaviors. Observations of SFSP operations and participants' interactions during meal service confirmed the behaviors discussed in the structured interviews. In accordance to the Constant Comparative Method described by Dye, et al, (2000), researchers organized themes for each individual case site, and placed the data into categories from the interviews and observation raw data. Each research team then conducted their own comparative analysis of their four-to-six site visits to create a summary across their sites. Then, each researcher submitted their raw data and summaries to the Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division research coordinator. Other factors that were confirmed during the structured interviews and observations data were the identification of SFSP

best practices and marketing strategies, and children's consumption and social behaviors and activities. These were incorporated into the results from the interviews/focus groups.

Summer Food Service Program Demographics and Descriptions

Sixteen structured interviews/focus groups consisting of SFSP administrators, staff members, and partners responded to 16 questions that related to the objectives and goals of the study. The interviews/focus groups occurred in diverse sites (*n*=16), including school districts, local government agencies (i.e., law enforcement, park and recreation agencies, and libraries) religious organizations, health care organizations, for-profit and non-profit organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, anti-hunger organizations, serving as sponsors for the SFSP in various settings (n=6 rural, n=10 urban/suburban). Summer Food Service Programs, at these sites, operated between June and September. There were no differences noted between rural and urban/suburban SFSPs with the exception of average daily participation (1588+/- 1631 urban vs. 415 +/- 138 rural/suburban, p=.001). The SFSP Behavioral Observation Form was used to confirm the data captured from the interviews/focus groups.

Planning

The information collected from SFSP sponsors described their experiences planning and implementing the SFSP. Respondents answered seven questions designed to describe the SFSP sponsors' organizations. Comparative analysis of the top two themes revealed that planning the timeline for the SFSP and personnel (employees and volunteers) were very important aspects of the process. The theme related to planning emerged and includes nine best practices for preparing to implement an SFSP program. Mapping and environmental scans were additional themes identified by participants who identified the initial procedures to assess areas of program needs as a part of the planning process. Communicating with State agencies was the fourth theme

perceived to be important for meeting qualification requirements; ensuring sponsors' met community eligibility; and completing verification of resources and sites to open and close before the start of the SFSP.

Timeline for planning depended upon the size of the SFSP. Large SFSPs begin planning activities immediately after the previous program ends. Other programs began planning in December and January for schools and early spring for non-profits and for-profit organizations based upon State Agency timelines for SFSP qualifying and verification procedures. The qualifying procedures that include assessment of community eligibility and participation at open and closed sites in geographic locations help sponsors determine their program's timeframe, type of food service operation format, human resources (employees and volunteers), and type of meal service (scratch cooked and/or pre-packaged; hot, cold, and/or mixed meals; conventional, satellite, and/or mobile sites). The type of food service operation and meal service was also determined based upon previous participation rates, community eligibility, resources, and mode of delivery. Themes, codes, and related quotes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summer Food Service Program Sponsors' Demographics, and Planning Structured Interview Responses

SFSP Sponsors' Questions/Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes
Type of SFSP Sponsoring Organization (Question 5, 8, 9)	• Schools • City/County/State Agencies o Parks & Recreation Departments • For-Profit Organizations (corporations) • Head Start • Non-profit/for-profit vendors • Boys & Girls Clubs • Anti-hunger organizations • Libraries • Health Clinics • Hospitals • Open sites	Statement about SFSP at Summer School Site: *"I have a pre-packaged lunch….we have summer school, and we have a group that's probably sixty…and then we have a group of sixty metro kids. Then we have four daycares in the neighborhood that bring children, a Boys & Girls Club….and all these groups come for lunch everyday."*
Foodservice Style (Question 1) ***Method of Delivery (Question***	• Conventional (prepare & serve meals onsite) • Vendor/Outsource • Centralized/Commissary (satellite meals) • Pre-packaged Meals	*"So, basically, we get our food vended from an outside source. And we have an agreement with them that they will prepare the meals off site; and they will deliver them to us no earlier than 11:30 a.m."*
Planning (Question 3) *Timeframe*	• December • February • Spring • A few weeks prior to the SFSP	*"We really start seriously thinking about it in February."*

Involvement	• Administration/Management
	• Sponsors' Employees
	• School District Personnel (Nutrition Director)
	   o Principals
	   o Teachers
	   o Nurse
	• Partners	

Marketing Strategies

Implementing an SFSP can be complex. The administrators in this study identified several marketing strategies and methods of delivery to reach and sustain children's participation in the program while meeting program requirements. Most sponsors implemented a mix of traditional (i.e., centralized food service production and provide meals on site) and non-traditional formats (i.e., satellite meal service to other sites) for SFSP delivery to children. The top themes for marketing information about the SFSP was through school-based communications (newsletters, school district/school websites, and parent call systems), newspapers, mobile apps, and free public service announcements through the media and social media outlets (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). Many organizations utilized resources provided by the State Agency to market the program. Additional marketing strategies utilized partners' communication and outreach programs to disseminate the information through local government agencies, other non-profit organizations, children's/students' camps, and religious organizations.

Summer Food Service Program Uniqueness

Featuring unique aspects of the SFSP was also a marketing resource for sponsors. The top five unique practices included using non-traditional meal delivery systems:

- Parks and recreation departments;
- School-based summer camps;
    - Sports camps,
    - Band/music camps,
    - Academic camps and enrichment programs;

- Other summer activities for children (i.e., public library reading programs, Vacation

   Bible School)

- Partner satellite organizations

  o Non-profit centers that specialize in caring for children

- Mobile units

  o School buses

  o Food trucks

  o Decommissioned buses, food trucks, and vans

Sponsors reported that it is important to understand how an agency is organized to operate a

SFSP while ensuring the delivery method is safe and appealing to children and their families.

They also reported that highlighting traditional and unique features at popular SFSP feeding

sites, such as children's activities, was an attractive point for marketing and fostering program

participation. More unique aspects and marketing strategies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summer Food Service Program Uniqueness and Marketing Strategies

SFSP Sponsors' Responses Questions/Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes
SFSP Uniqueness (Question 2)	• Non-Traditional Venues/Meal Delivery Sites/Services 　o Public Parks 　o Libraries 　o Housing Complex Center 　o Food Banks 　o Community Pool Centers 　o Sports Camps • Central facility 　o (*Were able to tailor meals to students' preferences for less waste*) • Partnerships 　o Daycare/Daycare Homes 　o Summer Camps 　o Churches 　o Other for-profit/non-profit organizations • Location • Mode of Delivery 　o Mobile Units 　　▪ Food Trucks 　　▪ School Buses 　　▪ De-commissioned Buses	*"Our number one is FARM Bus (Fun, Activities, Reading, and Meals)- it's a traveling ½ library and ½ meals. On weekends, we go to two migrant camps. Kids love to see the books. We have nutrition education (fun, food sampling) one a week."*
Marketing Strategies (Questions 4, 5)	• Public Service Announcements (PSA) 　o Schools (include Phone PSA and flyers sent home) 　o Radio 　o Television 　o Online 　　▪ Social Media 　　　• Facebook 　　　• Twitter 　　▪ Sponsors' Website 　o Partner with dollar store to have info print out on receipt • Flyers/Pamphlets/Brochures • Newsletters • Signage • Word of Mouth • Apps	"*…We do media blitzes; we put it in our newsletters to our parents that goes out and the YMCA's brochures; the Boys & Girls Club brochures; and our summer school brochures. So, if parents wanna know, we're used to it [advertising] in the past 'cause we've been doing it since 1985.*"

Partnerships

Partnerships with national, state, and local organizations were very important to the sponsors in this study. Collaborations with allied organizations, such as government agencies, food banks, schools, Head Starts, and other non-profit/for-profit organizations that serve children in low-income areas, were the greatest benefit to sponsors. These external stakeholders assisted sponsors with addressing operational and conventional issues related to recruiting, transporting, and providing meals and providing meals to children in areas of greatest need. Fifteen various partner organizations were identified by SFSP sponsors in this study.

Resources

Sponsors reported five primary resources they perceived necessary for implementing and sustaining a successful SFSP. These included the program itself for its guidelines, funding, and additional resources for management and nutrition education. Others were: external and local grants, volunteers and additional resources that partners provided. Partners were able to fulfill the resource gaps of many barriers or challenges that the sponsors' faced with funding, equipment, incentives and education resources for children, transportation (for food to SFSP sites or transporting children), in-kind and volunteer services. The thematic codes and quotes for partnerships and resources are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Summer Food Service Program Partnerships and Resources

SFSP Sponsors' Questions/Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes
Partnerships (Question 5)	- Schools - Head Start Agencies - Religious Organizations - Boys & Girls Clubs - YMCA - United Way - Government Organizations - Parks & Recreation Departments - Law Enforcement - Health Care Organizations - Public Libraries - Migrant Education Programs - Other Organizations - Anti-Hunger Organizations - Food Banks - HUD Housing Developments - Local Volunteer Organizations - Mobile Home Parks	*"We couldn't do it without our partners. The bus was their idea, and we've added on [more children for the program] to it."*
Resources (Question 5)	- SFSP - External Grants - Local Grants - Volunteers - Partnership Resources - Funding - Other Resources - Equipment - Incentives - education - In-kind Services - Transportation - Children - Meals	*"The food bank rents the trucks and other expenses are paid by the school district's SFSP. One of the things that has been tremendously successful, our assistant director went to the food bank to get funding for parents' meals, which has led to more kids participating. We tried it last year with a mobile pantry, but this year we are feeding adults."*

Summer Food Service Program Observation Findings

Many of the observed social, environmental, and consumption behaviors reported by the SFSP sponsors were confirmed by the researchers during required observations of the SFSP, and have been previously documented. Additional observations noted by researchers were the top five popular food items and the top five observed foods that were most often wasted. The top five popular food items were pizza, chocolate milk, fruit cocktail, fruit juice, and grapes. The food items wasted most often were 1% non-flavored milk, hummus, some sandwiches (soggy), vegetables, and whole, fresh fruits and vegetables. The observed food items consumed are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Summer Food Service Program Observation Findings

SFSP Sponsors' Questions/Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes
Popular Food Items	• Pizza • Chocolate Milk • Fruit Cocktail • Juice • Grapes	*"We have changed the menus if some items are not popular. We change the menus each year. There are very few Farm-to-School items in summer. So, we have not incorporated much Farm-to-School into the summer menus."*
Food Waste	• 1% non-flavored milk • Hummus • Some sandwiches (soggy) • Vegetables • Whole, fresh fruits and vegetables	

Summer Food Service Program Sponsors' Concerns, Issues, and Challenges

Many of the SFSP sponsors' concerns and challenges were similar, and did not vary by the size of the program. Most of the concerns, issues, and challenges that SFSP sponsors faced fell into two categories: operational issues and location challenges. Operational issues and concerns were reported throughout the SFSP – from planning for the program to distributing meals to children. Five of the operational issues are associated with the planning phase of the SFSP. Challenges such as congregate feeding requirements hampers the sponsors' ability to recruit and retain SFSP participants due to its consumption onsite requirements. Completion of SFSP application and verification requirements are also problematic for some sponsors. Marketing expenses, communication with partners, securing trained administrators and staff for the program are also problematic. Food service operational issues were related to food safety, maintaining food quality, and providing foods that children preferred were also issues sponsors encountered and were ones that affected retention of SFSP participants.

Administrators faced recruitment and retention challenges related to location. This included securing or partnering with organizations for congregate meals and trying to get verification for pockets of children whose household met the SFSP requirements for verification, but not the location for which they reside. Other issues noted were the inability to feed parents, not enough time to eat, safety, and the weather. These results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Summer Food Service Program Sponsors Concerns, Issues and Challenges

SFSP Sponsors' Questions/Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes

Issues and
 (Question 6, 7, 10, 13, 15)
	• Operational Issues
	    o Congregate Feeding Requirement Planning
	    o Verification
	    o Marketing SFSP
	      ▪ Recruitment
	    o Partnership Communications
	    o Employees and staffing
	      ▪ Training
	      ▪ Low Pay
	      ▪ Burnout
	    o Food Safety
	      ▪ Preparation
	      ▪ Transport
	      ▪ Time/Temperature
	    o Food Quality
	      ▪ Limited Selection
	      ▪ Food Holding Liability
	      ▪ Milk Temperature
	    o Children/Participants
	      ▪ Attraction & retention
	      ▪ Location
	      ▪ Expansion to areas of need
	      ▪ Can't feed the parents
	      ▪ Time to eat
	      ▪ Food waste
	 • Location
	    o Safety
	    o Weather
	    o Social trust
	    o Reaching children in areas of need
		"The biggest challenge is knowing there are children in need and the apartment won't allow us to come. I want another apartment complex to write a letter of recommendation. They have concerns about trash and who will supervise [the children]. Our staff wear purple shirts. They clean up…and it [the program] operates so well, it sells itself. Our kids help clean."

Benefits

Two distinct advantages were categorized as benefits for children and benefits for the sponsoring organization. Sponsors perceived that the SFSP helped to improve food security, and provided another venue for supporting children's growth and development by providing nutritious meals, provide opportunities for educational and social enrichment, and a safe place for social engagement. Benefits to sponsors included being able to provide employment opportunities to staff and community members, and an opportunity to impact the lives of children. The results related to benefits are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Summer Food Service Program Sponsors' Perceived Benefits and Recommendations

SFSP Sponsors' Questions/Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes

Benefits (*Question 14*)	• Benefits for Children
	    o Prevent hunger
	    o Provide safe places to commune and eat
	    o Nutrition/health education
	    o Partnerships to support children's growth and development
	    o Meet cultural needs
	
	• Sponsor's Benefits
	    o Provide work for staff
	    o Provide nutritious meals to children
		"[What works well] the support of our district and community. The trustees send volunteers. We have a core of staff members who have been here. The township library has a librarian who will ride on the bus. The property manager for the apartments comes out, too. The apartments want us to come back."

Recommendations (*Question 16*)	• Continue to advocate for the elimination of congregate feeding onsite. • Allow children to take part of their meals home. • Provide recommendations for better marketing and resources for possible partners. • Need the government to solicit nationally for the SFSP on television. • Provide more nutrition and physical education resources and incentives for the SFSP. • Provide funding for transportation. • Allow SFSP to feed parents.	*"Always a challenge; it is transportation, entertainment, feeding adults. All of these are important. Not many buy lunch, but it is $3.00 for a lunch. From a nutrition education standpoint, parents should eat, too. Everyone should eat together."*

CONCLUSIONS

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federal child nutrition program that supports the provision of healthful meals and snacks when school is not in session. The purpose of this study was to explore innovative marketing strategies and delivery models within the SFSP, and to capture pertinent data that described the success and issues that impact the program. The research objectives and goals were addressed through the use of an embedded, multiple-case, case-study methodology in 20 SFSP settings with 69 SFSP sponsors. Information collected from this study confirmed the identification of successful marketing strategies and best practices for SFSPs. Researchers for this study captured data from SFSP sponsors to provide insight into their perceptions of their SFSP regulations, benefits, partnerships and resources, program challenges and successes, and unique characteristics of SFSPs.

Many of the challenges that SFSP sponsors in this study reported are similar to those identified in previous research. Issues identified, such as transportation for children to congregate to meal sites; program recruitment and retention issues; safety; and challenges verifying children whose households qualify, but are not located in areas identified as areas of need (Wauchope & Stracuzzi, 2010).

Study Limitations

The limitations of this study were related to the qualitative methods used for the study. Researchers were unable to verify all SFSP best practices and marketing strategies that could be generalized to SFSPs across the country. However, the interviews with SFSP sponsors corroborated the benefits, perceptions, best practices, and challenges they face related to the multiple roles that they play in various SFSP. Researchers also did not conduct case studies in all seven United States Department of Agriculture regions.

Recommendations for Research and Child and Adult Care Food Program Implementation

The results of this study could be used to develop an updated SFSP best practice resource for sponsoring organizations. The data collected could also be used to further explore planning, partnership efforts, marketing strategies, and innovative delivery methods that could be implemented to strengthen recruitment and retention of SFSP participants. Perception and behavioral data related to the challenges and issues that sponsors face and their strategic efforts to overcome them could be used to explore additional options and training opportunities to assist sponsoring organizations with program evaluations and improvements. Additional qualitative research is needed to explore the specified needs of diverse SFSP sponsors to confirm the findings in this study.

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