

# It Takes a Community: Innovative Approaches and Best Practices in Summer Food Service Program Operation



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## Background

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides free meals and snacks to low-income children during the months when school is not in session. Any local government organization, school district or non-profit can apply to sponsor a SFSP site. Meals and snacks reimbursed under this program meet federal nutrition standards. Currently, this program is substantially underutilized, with only one out of seven eligible children accessing a SFSP site. As such, systematic investigations to identify barriers, as well as best practices, are vitally needed.

## Research Objective

To explore innovative strategies and delivery models within the SFSP and to identify best practices and predictors of program success.



## Methods

- This study utilized an embedded, replicable, multiple-case, case study design.
- Site visits ( $n=25$ ) were conducted in representative and innovative SFSPs in five United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service regions.
- Structured interviews were conducted among SFSP directors and staff in an array of sponsored program formats ( $n=16$ ), including schools districts, local government agencies, religious organizations and non-profit organizations ( $n=6$  rural/suburban,  $n=10$  urban).
- Program-level characteristics were collected, and practices and procedures were observed using a behavioral observation tool designed to meet the objectives of this study.
- All interviews were transcribed and a content analysis was performed using constant comparative methodology.
- A  $X^2$  analysis or means test was performed on program characteristics data to detect significant differences between urban and rural programs.

## Results

Three distinct themes emerged from the interview data:

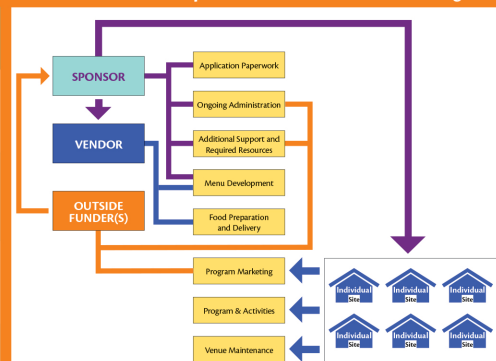
- Community Partnerships:** Partnerships with outside agencies and funders were seen as critical for success;
- United/Innovative Approach:** United approach in which tasks were delegated to individuals and agencies with specific expertise and then organized to ensure program success; and
- SFSP Activities & Incentives:** Programs offering activities and/or incentives for SFSP participants were reported as a key factor in participation and retention.

No significant differences were found between urban and suburban/rural programs with the exception of average daily participation (1588 +/- 1631 urban vs. 415 +/- 138 rural/suburban,  $p=.001$ ).

### Barriers Reported Among Summer Food Service Programs

Barriers Reported	Percent Reporting	Respondent Comments
Adequate Funding	31.3%	"My concerns are money! And money and money and..." "I have to pursue other funding (beyond reimbursement) to make the program whole." "Operationally...keeping consistent funding...if you're just relying on USDA funding to float this program, it doesn't work."
Staffing/Partnerships	25.0%	"The vended (meals) model is sometimes hard; a program is only as strong as the vendor." "It's really important to have written contracts...everyone tries to cut corners; that's how business is." "We get a lot of calls from various groups that are doing enrichment activities with children and we provide the feeding...but it takes a lot of detail orientation to people...because you need to work with so many other groups."
Planning	6.3%	"We need policy change to streamline the administrative process." "We have a lot of moving parts, a lot of different personalities involved..." "To do summer lunch right you have to start in March, really you should start in January or even a year round kind of effort."
Other/Multiple Challenges	18.3%	"The more (SFSP sites) the merrier, but there's nobody else because very few organizations want to do it because it's a financial (and organizational) nightmare. You have to be big enough to make it viable..."

### Potential Model for Optimal Summer Food Service Program



## Conclusions and Application

Establishing community partnerships and providing activities to augment food service hold potential to improve reach and success rates of SFSPs. Delegation of tasks and roles in a united approach emerged as a best practice among successful SFSPs. The need for strategic partnerships and supplemental funding were also common themes among respondents, as were "outside the box" or critical thinking, and having leaders with business and/or leadership experience. This study provides insight for current SFSP sponsors, as well as schools or agencies interested in becoming sponsors.