



Unmet Need in the Summer Meals Program

Summer can be the hungriest time of year for many children from low-income families. The hunger experienced during these months can have far-reaching consequences that last well beyond the end of the season, affecting a child's academic achievement, brain development and overall health.

The federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) was created to help children from low-income families get the food they need when school is out of session. The current program, however, operates under a set of one-size-fits-all regulations that do not work effectively in many American communities. As a result, the program has struggled to reach more than 15 percent of children who receive a free or reduced-price lunch during the school year.

One of the biggest hurdles is the “congregate feeding requirement,” which stipulates that children travel to a central location and eat their meals together at the site. When this works, this means children are eating healthy meals in safe, interactive environments. In most communities, however, kids from low-income families face real barriers to accessing these meals. Transportation challenges, extreme weather patterns and bureaucratic hurdles mean six out of seven kids who may need these meals aren't getting them.

Overview

Created in 1968 to replace the lunches that kids from low-income families were eating at school during the academic year, the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) has not been significantly changed since its inception, despite significant changes in demographics, technology and nutrition science.

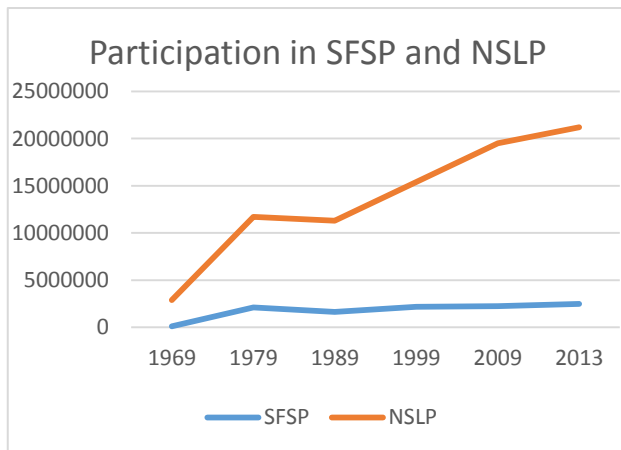
During the school year, 21 million children from low-income families eat a school lunch every day. During the summer months, however, the vast majority (85 percent) of these same children are not getting a meal through SFSP. This adds a substantial financial burden on their families, who can see their grocery bills grow \$300 each month during the summer in order to replace the meals children were receiving at school. (APCO Insight and Share our Strength, 2013)

The rules and regulations of the current program constrain its ability to work effectively and leave millions of children with out the proper nutrition they need during the summer. This leads to health issues and exacerbates the “summer slide,” when children lose ground academically.

Solution

It's time to update the way we feed kids in the summertime. Instead of operating under a one-size-fits-all set of regulations, states and communities need the flexibility to institute the most efficient and effective policies, allowing them to reach all hungry children, no matter where they live.

Summer Meal Program Barriers



While participation in the school lunch program (shown by the red line in the chart) has grown since 1968, participation in summer meals (shown by the blue) has stagnated.

What this means: Many children struggling with hunger are successfully getting a nutritious meal each school day. The same cannot be said for these children during the summer months. With only one in seven low-income children getting the nutrition they need from the federal summer meals program, the nation is struggling with a high degree of unmet need.

Here are a few of the major barriers in the current summer meals program:

Dismantled and Recreated Bureaucracy

The seasonal nature of the summer meals program creates inefficiencies in program delivery as the program must be re-created at the beginning of the summer and dismantled at the start of the school year. Every year, as the school year draws to a close, sponsors and site coordinators must submit applications, increase staff, participate in trainings, renew licenses, procure vendors, identify sites, and reach out to eligible kids so they know where and when meals will be served. The state agencies responsible for program implementation have to solicit and approve sponsor applications, conduct training, monitor sites before and during the period of operation, and manage the relationships and reimbursement with USDA. For organizations with limited staff or tight budgets, participating in the program strains capacity and discourages program expansion.

Decreased School Participation

Traditionally, schools have been the largest sponsor of summer meals because they possess infrastructure and are a trusted destination in the community. However, with tight post-recession state and local budgets, fewer schools are able to keep their doors open during the summer for summer school or to help feed hungry kids. While many schools allow other sponsors to operate programming on their property, many are hesitant to allow children on their campus when school staff is not available to provide supervision.

Lack of transportation

During the school year, many children from low-income families rely on school buses every day for their transportation needs. This transportation is unavailable during the summer months. With parents at work during the day, it can be tough for kids to find transportation to summer meals sites. Many kids in rural communities live miles away from sites; many kids in urban communities face unsafe city streets and dangerous traffic. In suburban communities, where pockets of poverty continue to grow, inaccessible or non-existent public transportation systems make traveling to sites impossible.

Communities without open summer meals sites

In the current summer meals program, schools, churches, and community organizations may provide meals on-site to children when they are located in predominantly low-income communities (defined as school districts or census block groups with at least 50 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch). However, the suburbanization of poverty over the last 20 years has resulted in one-third of low-income children living outside of these eligible communities. In 2012, for example, there were 16.5 million Americans living below the poverty line in the suburbs compared with 13.5 million in cities.

Summer Meal Program Solutions

Solutions and Policy Recommendations

It's time to update the way we feed kids in the summertime.

The current federal summer meals program requires that children come to a central location and eat their meals at a specific time in a specific setting (referred to as the congregate feeding requirement). In places the program works well, kids eat healthy meals in safe, interactive environments. However, this one-size-fits-all program design does not account for transportation challenges; for extreme weather patterns; or for children living outside of communities where a site may operate. The barriers that prevent more kids from accessing these meals (transportation, a lack of open sites, violence and severe weather) also limit efforts to reach more of the children who struggle with hunger during the summer months.

Instead, the program needs more flexibility to allow for more efficient and effective programming to reach children in underserved communities through options such as home-delivered meals (similar to what Meals on Wheels does for seniors), allowing children to leave a site with a meal, or providing a benefit to purchase food where summer meals programming is not operating.

As Congress considers the reauthorization of child nutrition programs in 2015, it has the opportunity to improve the program, providing states and communities with the ability to use the most efficient and effective methods to reach more children.

As a result, states would be able to feed more of their hungry kids, no matter where they live.



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Contact Lucy Melcher at lmelcher@strength.org