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Opportunities for Increasing Participation in the Summer Food Service Program:

Perspectives from Sites, Sponsors and Caregivers in the Midlands of South Carolina

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Executive Summary:

Currently, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) reaches one out of every five low-income children in South Carolina.¹ To identify opportunities for increasing participation, we interviewed 4 program sponsors, 5 sites and 34 caregivers. Results point to the need to enhance the experience for youth at sites, for example, by providing activities in conjunction with serving meals; ensure meal delivery to sites; strategically choose site locations; and increase outreach of program and site information to families. A site case study and specific recommendations are provided.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) reached one out of six low-income children nationwide in 2014 (the most recent numbers available); in South Carolina, one out of five low-income children participated.¹ The past three summers have seen a steady increase in the number of children receiving meals through this summer nutrition program. Yet the majority of children who receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year do not access the SFSP program. How can we continue the upward participation trend of the past few years to ensure more children do not experience hunger or food insecurity during the summer?

To answer this question, we conducted interviews with program sponsors (i.e., organizations that manage SFSP sites through activities such as identifying and monitoring sites and preparing or getting food delivered); sites (i.e., locations where children receive meals); and caregivers in the Midlands of South Carolina. Here we present the themes that emerged through the interviews, provide a case study of a new SFSP site and how it used some of the approaches discussed, and provide recommendations for realizing opportunities to increase participation.

Opportunities for Increasing Participation in the SFSP

Enhance the Experience for Youth:

Partnerships: Partner with agencies that provide summer activities. Lexington Richland School District 5 “partnered with some churches this year, and they provided activities such as reading lessons and other stuff with the kids. I believe that is key.”

Summer Camps: Increase the number of summer camps that serve as sites. Killian Road Park is a “half-day, full day site. Half-day means from 7 am to 12 pm, my kids come to camp for no charge. From 12 pm to 6 pm, it is \$45 per child per week. So anybody who wishes to be a part of the summer feeding program can, as lunch is served at 11:30 am. Those youth can also participate in the summer camp activities for free as well.”



Social Experience: Provide an opportunity for youth to interact with their peers. A caregiver stated “my son really enjoyed his time at Northstar. Being around kids his own age, being able to play basketball and make new friends were things he enjoyed.”

Ensure Meal Delivery to Sites:

Remove a Barrier: Ensuring meal delivery from sponsors to sites breaks down a potential barrier to participating. Columbia Housing Authority believes “it would be extremely helpful instead of us picking up the food if our sponsor would be willing to send the food out. We talked about if they had to go to a summer school that was en route to one of our communities if they could bring the food out in a timely manner.” Richland School District 2 also agrees: “Oakgrove Baptist and Northstar Church were very happy we were able to deliver the meals to them. I don’t think they would be sites if we could not deliver. It removes a burden from the sites of worrying about picking up meals.” Some potential sites do not have the capacity (e.g., staff time or means of transportation) to pick up their own food.

Sponsor Buy-In: Some sponsors are already delivering meals to sites. Lexington Richland School District 5 tries to “deliver meals to sites whenever possible. We delivered most of our meals to our sites this summer, as we only had one site that came to pick up the meals.”

The Summer Food Service Program is administered at a federal level by the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. For more information, visit: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program-sfsp>. The South Carolina Department of Education administers the program at a state level. To learn more or apply to become a sponsor, visit: <https://ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/nutrition/summer-food-program/>. End Child Hunger SC is helping build the capacity of the program in the Midlands. If you are interested in being a part of these efforts, follow End Child Hunger SC on Facebook or contact Ashley Page at pagea@email.sc.edu or Carrie Draper at draper@mailbox.sc.edu.

Opportunities for Increasing Participation in the SFSP

Be Strategic About Site Locations:

Bring Sites to Youth: Increase the number of sites at locations that youth already visit during the summer. Columbia Housing Authority stated *“we had nine sites this summer. We averaged around 80 kids at all of our sites, and parents are happy for the program to come in.”* Sandhills Library, a branch of Richland Library, also was a site this year.

Representatives from the library know *“there are kids around us that do not have access to meals during the summer. They are in the library anyway picking up books, participating in our summer learning program, those types of things. So it’s a good fit to meet those children where they are and maybe in an environment that feels different and maybe doesn’t feel as intimidating as going back to their school.”*

Bring Youth to Sites: Use buses, vans, carpooling and other transportation methods to ensure youth are able to get to a site. Northstar Christian Center put a system in place to overcome transportation barriers for youth: *“we used our two buses to bring kids from the local neighborhoods like Brookhaven and Winslow to the church.”* A parent whose child participated at Northstar liked *“that they brought the kids to the church and also had activities for them to do.”*

Mobile Strategies: Use resources to deliver meals to youth in the community. Lexington-Richland School District 5 *“purchased a food truck this year. We served two residential low-income areas, and we went there every day. I think we can pick up more sites next year for sure using the food truck. I am hoping we can do four sites per day next summer. I think we served 85 kids this summer with the food truck, so I am hoping next summer we will be able to serve 200.”* Mobile strategies could especially mitigate barriers to participation among youth living in rural locations.

Increase Outreach to Families:

Let Caregivers Know Site Locations Before the Summer Starts: All caregivers interviewed stated it would be helpful to be provided with site information before their child(ren) gets out of school for the summer. One parent believes *“a good way to market the program would be through schools. If you already knew where the sites would be for the summer, you could give the kids something before they get out for summer break. That would be a sure way to get the information to the parents.”*

Social Media: Leverage 21st century technology to market the program. A majority of caregivers believed this was important: *“people are always online, such as Facebook and Instagram, you get can folks involved to promote the program on there.”*

The Case of Northstar Christian Center

Northstar Christian Center, a church located in the Northeast section of Columbia, participated as a SFSP site for the first time in the summer of 2015. The church served a morning snack and lunch to youth every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from June to early August. The youth pastor stated the church was looking for a way to physically provide food to youth and was happy to meet that need through this program.

SFSP provides sites flexibility in establishing meal times and choosing which meals will be served. Sites are able to choose a maximum of two meals out of four options: breakfast, morning snack, lunch, and/or afternoon snack. Northstar decided to serve a morning snack at 10 am and lunch at 12 pm to structure their site as a mini-camp. Northstar wanted to do more than simply feed children and send them home; therefore, incorporating activities for youth into the 2-hour duration between providing food was important to them. The youth pastor believes students will not come to a SFSP site just for the food. Rather, participants want to be engaged in a fun way. The church's six volunteers, including individuals with education and sports backgrounds, led students in science projects, badminton games, volleyball and other physical activities between the morning snack and lunch period. A school bus driver for the local school district also volunteered her services to drive the church's small bus to transport students to the church, recognizing that not all youth would have a way to get to the site otherwise.

Safety and overcoming the transportation barrier was a high priority for the church. Northstar is located off of a busy road that children from surrounding neighborhoods would have to cross to get to the church. The church made the decision to use their bus and pay for the gas expense to avoid these safety hazards that might also have deterred some youth from participating. The church picked up youth from three surrounding neighborhoods on a weekly basis. Parents of the youth that rode the church bus signed a consent form that gave the church permission to transport their child(ren). The youth pastor stated that the bus was filled with elementary school students everyday, as well as a few middle and high school-aged youth.

Northstar Christian Center took full advantage of their local resources to ensure success for their summer feeding program. Church volunteers placed door hangers on doors in local neighborhoods to inform parents that they would be a SFSP site. The church



assured youth and parents that transportation would not be an issue by utilizing their own bus. The church also incorporated age-appropriate activities to keep youth engaged for the 2 hours between morning snack time and lunch and to increase their interest in returning. This summer, Northstar found that integrating activities, food and transportation into the SFSP experience yielded success, even for a first-time site. Northstar is looking forward to continuing the program in many summers to come.

Recommendations:

- ⇒ Provide more activities and programming at SFSP sites in conjunction with meals to enhance the experience for youth, for example, by partnering with a local public library branch.
- ⇒ Develop an alternative system for transporting meals to sites if sponsors lack capacity, such as utilizing church- or county-owned vans and volunteers.
- ⇒ Increase the number of sites located in neighborhoods that are within safe walking distance to youth and/or use transportation to bring youth to sites.
- ⇒ Enhance outreach efforts of the program that take advantage of traditional and non-traditional methods to better inform caregivers of the program and site locations. In particular, plan and finalize sites well in advance of summer so that word can be spread by channels available through schools, such as school social workers and automated calls home.



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