

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)

This paper is part of a series of nutrition policy profiles prepared by Prevention Institute for the Center for Health Improvement (CHI).

Background

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federally funded child nutrition program that provides low-income children with free, nutritious meals during summer and holiday breaks. Schools operating on a year-round academic calendar also use the SFSP to offer meals during off-track periods. During the school year, 15.3 million U.S. children rely on free or reduced-price school meals to meet their daily nutritional needs.¹ When the school doors close for vacation, these children can be left without a reliable source of food. The SFSP is designed to fill this gap, providing a third of the recommended daily allowance of key nutrients.

The SFSP served more than 2.2 million children at over 29,000 sites nationwide in 1998, and in California it served an average of 185,689 children each day. Though California increased usage of the SFSP by 55.6 percent between 1990 and 1999,² the SFSP remains severely underutilized. Nationwide, approximately 16 percent of children who were enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch programs during the school year also participated in the SFSP;³ in California, this number was only 9 percent.⁴ The SFSP is not reaching all eligible children because families are not aware of it, and there are an inadequate number of convenient sites in low-income neighborhoods.

The consequences of inadequate nutrition in children include stunted physical and cognitive development, increased susceptibility to infection, listlessness, and irritability.⁵ This may explain why participation in school breakfast and lunch programs has been linked to improved learning and better test scores.^{6,7} In 1999, almost one in ten U.S. households were “food insecure,” reporting difficulty in obtaining culturally appropriate, nutritionally adequate food through non-emergency sources. Among California households, 11.4 percent were food insecure, and 4.1 percent also experienced hunger.⁸

Policies

- 1. Sponsoring agencies should offer SFSP meals at a greater number of convenient sites.*
- 2. Sponsors should provide eligible children with transportation to SFSP sites.*
- 3. Federal, state, and local agencies should educate parents, children, and youth about the SFSP and how to identify participating sites.*
- 4. Federal and state agencies should simplify paperwork requirements for SFSP participation to encourage institutions to take part in the program.*

At the local level, the SFSP is administered by approved sponsors, including school districts, local government agencies, camps, or private nonprofit organizations. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reimburses local sites for meals and operating costs through state agencies.⁹ Sponsoring agencies can increase the number of children reached by the SFSP by offering the program at more sites, and by making the sites more accessible to eligible children.¹⁰

Effectiveness

Partnership, Outreach, and Parent Involvement Initiative

Little River Baptist Church, Ware Shoals, South Carolina

- Between 1998 and 1999, the Little River Baptist Church expanded its SFSP sites from one to ten. Daily participation in the program grew from an average of 107 children in 1998 to 660 in 1999. Parent involvement was key to the program's success. Little River sent biweekly newsletters home with the children, invited parents to drop in at the sites, and formed a parent advisory board. Parents helped overcome the transportation barrier that prevented some children from participating in meal services by volunteering to serve as drivers.

Putnam County Summer Program

Putnam County School District Migrant Education Program, Palatka, Florida

- Parents who are migrant workers often work long hours, have chronic health problems, and do not have access to transportation. In an environment in which working parents spend most of their day away from home, the Putnam County Public School's Summer Program provided structured activities and nutritious meals to the children of these workers. Transportation to the lunch site was offered through the Putnam County School District Migrant Education Program. Each day, children were encouraged to eat their lunches and were challenged to try new foods. Success of the program was demonstrated by the 95 percent attendance rate.

Missouri Summer Program

Missouri Department of Health, Jefferson City, Missouri

- The Missouri Department of Health employed a comprehensive plan to market the SFSP. As a result, they were able to increase SFSP sponsor participation by 41 percent; 46 new sites participated in the program, and 39 percent more meals were served in 1999. The Missouri Summer Program's outreach efforts targeted three under-served regions in Missouri. The plan allowed the State agency to: research and analyze participation trends; survey participating sponsors to identify their needs; identify community organizations with the facilities to prepare, hold, and safely store foods; and increase awareness of the need for the Summer Program among local policy-makers. The marketing plan also reduced the paperwork burden for sponsors and streamlined the application process.

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¹ Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture. National School Lunch Program: total participation. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/slfypart.htm>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

² *State of the States: California* [online report]. Food Research and Action Center Web site. December 2000. Available at: http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/states/ca.pdf. Accessed May 13, 2002.

³ Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy. Running the summer food program in rural areas: major issues and model programs [executive summary]. Available at: <http://hunger.tufts.edu/pub/runsummer.shtml>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

⁴ California Food Policy Advocates. *School's Out...Who Ate? California Summer Food Service Program 2000*. San Francisco, Calif: California Food Policy Advocates; 2000.

⁵ Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy. *Statement on the Link Between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children 1995*. 2nd ed. Medford, Mass: Tufts University School of Nutrition; 1995.

⁶ Gunderson GW. *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development* [online report]. Food and Nutrition Service, US Dept of Agriculture Web site. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/INCLUDES/NSLPBackgroundandDevelopment.htm>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

⁷ Meyers AF, Sampson AE, Weitzman M, Rogers BL, Kayne H. School breakfast program and school performance. *American Journal of Diseases in Children*. 1989;143:1234-1239.

⁸ Nord M, Jemison K, Bickel G. *Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger, by State, 1996-98*. Economic Research Service, US Dept of Agriculture Web site. September 1999. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 2. Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/epubs/pdf/fanrr2/fanrr2.pdf>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

⁹ Summer Food Service Program, US Department of Agriculture. Frequently asked questions. Available at: <http://www.summerfood.usda.gov/About/faq.html>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

¹⁰ Summer Food Service Program, US Department of Agriculture. Program access. Available at: http://www.summerfood.usda.gov/States/program_access.html. Accessed May 13, 2002.