

FEATURE STORY

USDA's Summer Food Service Program: A Wonderful Service Opportunity

Are there children in your community who will go hungry this summer? Children from low-income areas are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. But those programs end when school ends for the summer. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) helps fill the hunger gap.

"Good nutrition is essential for effective learning every day, all year long," said Stan Garnett, Director, Child Nutrition Division, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Just as learning does not end when school lets out, neither does the need for good nutrition. The Summer Food Service Program helps children get the nutrition they need to learn, play, and grow throughout the summer months when they are out of school."

The SFSP was created to ensure that children in low-income areas could continue to receive nutritious meals during long school vacations, when they do not have access to school lunch or breakfast. According to Garnett, more than 15 million children depend on nutritious free and reduced-price meals and snacks at school for 9 months out of the year, but only 2 million receive the free meals provided by the SFSP during the summer months.

"We know that many children may lack a nutritious meal during summer vacation because there is not enough food for them at home," Garnett said. "During those long summer months, the SFSP serves what is too often their only nutritious meal of the day." Although the program guarantees free meals for all eligible children, he added, it continues to be underutilized.

The SFSP is the single largest Federal resource available for local sponsors who want to combine a feeding program with a summer activity program. However, many schools and summer recreation programs are not aware that Federal funds are available to provide free meals and snacks to children in low-income areas during the summer months.

SFSP sponsors receive payments for serving healthy meals and snacks to children and teenagers, 18 years and younger, at approved sites in low-income areas. Schools, public agencies, and private nonprofit organizations may apply to sponsor the program. Your state education department can tell you where and how to apply. All sponsors receive training before starting the program to learn how to plan, operate, and monitor a successful food service program.

If you are a sponsor, the payments you receive are based on the number of meals you serve and the documented costs of running your program. In summer 2001, the maximum payment rates ranged from 52 cents for each snack up to \$2.23 for each lunch served that meets Federal guidelines.

“The program draws children into supervised activities that are safe, fun, and filled with learning opportunities,” Mr. Garnett said. “Children benefit nutritionally by receiving complete, wholesome meals, and parents benefit from some help in stretching their food dollars.”

Why not take advantage of this valuable resource to provide nutritious meals to children in your community? Contact your state education department (in most states) to learn more about the Summer Food Service Program today. There is also a list of State contacts at www.summerfood.usda.gov, along with other useful information on SFSP.

In addition to becoming a sponsor, you can partner with sponsors in your community to “adopt” a site. You can also provide volunteers to deliver meals, drive or walk with children to the site, be mentors, and lead activities. The Summer Food Service Program offers you a unique opportunity to reach out in service to others and improve the health and nutrition of children.

“We know that there is a link between nutrition and learning. Children who have access to wholesome meals learn better, act better, and feel better,” Mr. Garnett said. “We must ensure, both for our future and for theirs, that children have access to nutritious meals during the summer.”