

SUMMER MEALS IN YOUR COMMUNITY – ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT FOR MAYORS

The need for nourishing meals doesn't end with the school day or the onset of summer. For many families, summer is the most difficult time to put food on the table, and a time when children face increased risks of hunger, obesity, and learning loss. These pressing challenges demand urgent leadership. Thankfully, summer nutrition programs are proven solutions, yet fewer than 20% of eligible children are reached by traditional summer meals sites. Mayors can play an important role in closing this gap and ensuring all children have the meals they need to thrive.

What is the Summer Meals Program?

Federal summer nutrition programs are funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and administered by a designated agency in each state. Most program providers choose to serve meals using the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which is available to schools and qualifying non-profit organizations. However, schools can also choose to serve summer meals through the National School Lunch Program's Seamless Summer Option (SSO).

The Summer Meals program was designed to reach kids with the nutrition they need over summer vacation, but has historically only reached a fraction of the kids who need it - In fact, 6 out of 7 kids who may have needed summer meals have historically missed out. That's because major barriers stand in the way, particularly in rural communities, where families face many barriers when accessing summer meals, including lack of transportation, fuel costs, work schedules, and extreme weather.

In 2022, Congress enacted game-changing improvements to summer nutrition programs that has dramatically expanded access. First, states can now offer a Summer EBT program, also known as SUN Bucks, to provide eligible families with a \$120 grocery benefit per child per summer. And second, a new non-congregate option for summer meals programs in rural areas allows flexible "grab-and-go" or home-delivered models that reach families who faced barriers to access traditional summer meal programs.

These improvements have made a dramatic impact. In 2024, 37 states, the District of Columbia, all five U.S. territories, and two Indian Tribal Organizations implemented Summer EBT, reaching over 21 million children with over \$2.5 billion in grocery benefits. The Rural Non-Congregate Meal option enabled 13% more families to participate in summer meal programs in 2024 compared to 2023. [The full list of participating states is available here.](#)

Summer Meals Resources

- [Summer Meals Fact Sheet](#)
- [USDA Summer EBT Outreach Toolkit](#)
- [Non-Congregate Summer Meals](#)

Ways to Engage

One of the major barriers to children participating in Summer Meals is the knowledge of the program's existence. By shedding light on the importance of summer nutrition, mayors can raise awareness about the Summer Meals programs in their communities. There are several strategic ways that Mayors can help raise awareness:

1) Issue a Summer Meals Proclamation

Use this [Summer Meals proclamation template](#) to declare the availability and importance of Summer Meals in your community. By magnifying the importance of ending summer hunger, your community will increase awareness of Summer EBT, amplify the availability of Summer Meals in your community, and reinforce ending childhood hunger as a priority for your administration. *Be sure to amplify the message by promoting the proclamation through local media and social media!*

2) Pave the Way for Summer Meals Sites in Your Community

In many towns and cities, summer meals sponsors must be granted access to public facilities like community centers and parks. Make this approval process seamless so meal sites can open up quickly where children gather, learn, and play.

3) Promote the No Kid Hungry Summer Resource Hub & Outreach Toolkit

Use and disseminate No Kid Hungry's [summer resource hub](#) and [Outreach Toolkit](#) to help families access food when school is out over the summer.



Visit a Summer Meals Site!

Experience the program in action by visiting a Summer Meals site while also leveraging media interest to raise awareness in your community. During a site visit, you can:

- Engage with children, parents, and families. *Try taking a turn serving meals!*
- Listen and learn about the experiences of Summer Meals providers.
- Invite and host reporters to publish a story about Summer Meals. *Be sure to share ways how children can access meals in their neighborhoods!*
- Build relationships with community members.

Kick it up a notch!

Consider sponsoring a Summer Meals kick-off or spike-event. These high energy events are a great way to increase awareness and boost participation. Kick-off events are best held in June and spike events are mid-summer to help reinvigorate participation in Summer Meals.

For questions, contact:

Aaron Goldstein, Senior Manager, Local Government Relations at agoldstein@strength.org