



BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME MEAL PROGRAM MODELS AND SUSTAINABILITY



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INTRODUCTION

This guide is based on extensive research on out-of-school time (OST) programming and food insecurity, and includes input from urban, suburban, and rural park and recreation agencies across the United States. In collaboration with federally funded meal programs for OST, park and recreation agencies can play a key role in reducing hunger and preventing obesity among children. The purpose of this guide is to highlight key strategies that park and recreation agencies can use in the implementation of six main components of OST meal programs, including identifying a meal sponsor, making meal sites accessible, providing nutrition education, promoting physical activity, disseminating program information, and planning for sustainability.

Out-of-school time, such as during summer and winter breaks, has been shown to negatively impact children's health, especially low-income and minority children who rely on federally funded meal programs during these times.¹ The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides funding for OST meals to ensure nutritious food for children who rely on meal programs during the school year. The three OST meal programs funded by the USDA are the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the National School Lunch Program - Afterschool Snack Program (NSLP).

In this guide you will find models for implementing six main components of OST meal programs at park and recreation sites. Examples of program models, challenges to consider, and recommendations for action are included in the description of each component. All six components emphasize the importance of collaborating with other community organizations to address food insecurity, and models can be selected and/or adapted depending on unique community factors and partnerships.

Whether your park and recreation agency is currently implementing an OST meal program or you are interested in starting one for the first time, this guide is designed to help you pick the best approaches for your community. For each of the development stages, consult with relevant authorities in your area to ensure that your program is compatible with state and local policies.

UNDERSTANDING FOOD INSECURITY

- » Food insecurity is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a lack of access to quality food, a lack of access to a variety of food, and in some cases a disruption in food intake due to lack of resources.
- » Food insecurity is a complex problem that overlaps with affordable housing, social isolation, health problems, medical costs, and low wages. While poverty and food insecurity are related, not all people living below the poverty line experience it, and people that live above the poverty line can still be at-risk of experiencing it.
- » In 2017, approximately 40 million Americans, including 12 million children, were food insecure.

Source: Understand Food Insecurity, Hunger and Health, Feeding America. Accessible at: <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity>

OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Out-of-school time (OST) nutrition programs, including the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), provide federal funding to serve meals and snacks to children 18 and under in low-income areas.² Through these programs, children can access free meals after school, on weekends, during school holidays, and throughout the summer, when they may otherwise miss meals that they rely on while in school. In 2010, one in five children in the U.S. lived in a food-insecure household, and children in rural households are even more likely to experience food insecurity.^{2,3} Children living in food insecure households may experience both hunger and obesity.⁴ Out-of-school time meal programs can help reduce hunger and improve nutrition. SFSP and other OST meal offerings are important for providing low-income children nutritious meals and snacks as well as the opportunity for physical activity during the summer months to combat the risk of weight gain during the summer months.⁵

The National School Lunch Program has continued to grow since it was introduced in 1968, however participation in the Summer Food Service Program has remained relatively stagnant since the 1980s.⁶ In fact, nearly 85% of children that receive meals through the NSLP during the school year do not have access to free meals in the summer through SFSP. According to the USDA, in 2013 over 20 million children participated in NSLP while less than 5 million participated in SFSP.⁶ Barriers to participating in SFSP include a burdensome annual application process, decreased participation among schools that do not have the resources to remain open during summer months, and maintaining adequate enrollment when transportation to the meal site is a major challenge for families.⁶

Park and recreation agencies can serve a vital role in OST meal programs as many have existing youth programming that can be leveraged, including camps, half-day, full-day, and specific sports programming. Meal sites that offer full-day or half-day youth programming are typically more successful feeding sites because children are already accessing these services and programs, and these services provide childcare for extended periods of time.⁷ Meal sites that are only open for meal service can generally be challenging for families, especially when they do not live near a feeding site.

USDA CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

OST Meal Programs funded by USDA include:

- » **Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)**
(<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program>): SFSPs are run as open sites, enrolled sites, or camps. Open sites serve free meals and snacks to all children in a low-income area, and enrolled sites serve free meals to all children enrolled in a program with at least 50 percent of children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Participating camps provide reimbursable free meals and snacks to children based on their individual eligibility. In general, SFSPs can serve up to two meals, or one meal and one snack, per child. Camps can serve up to three meals per day.
- » **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)**
(<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/child-and-adult-care-food-program>): The CACFP's At-Risk Afterschool component provides up to one free snack and one free meal per child in attendance areas where at least 50 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. The program is available to OST programs during the school year, including on weekends and holidays.
- » **National School Lunch Program (NSLP)**
(<https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/national-school-lunch-program-nslp>): The NSLP's Afterschool Care Snack Service is available for programs sponsored or operated by a school district and allows for one snack to be served on regular school days

Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service Programs for Out-of-School-Time Providers, Available at: https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/Afterschool_Options.pdf

BEST PRACTICES

The following sections provide examples of the various aspects and considerations for implementing an OST meal program, including identifying a meal sponsor, making meal site locations accessible, providing nutrition education, promoting physical activity, disseminating program information, and planning for sustainability. It is important to consider the unique assets and challenges of your community in order to determine which program models will fit best.

IDENTIFYING A MEAL PROGRAM SPONSOR

APPROACHES

Meal program sponsors can be school districts, non-profit organizations such as churches or YMCAs, and local governments, including park and recreation agencies. In communities where OST meal programs exist, park and recreation agencies may be able to partner with an existing sponsor and provide their facilities as additional meal service locations. In many communities, OST meal programs are sponsored by school districts, as an extension of the meal service they provide during the school year.

Collaborating with an existing meal sponsor in your community leverages resources that have already been applied to obtaining licensing and establishing a meal procurement and distribution system, both of which require staffing and equipment that not may not be available to all park and recreation agencies. Meal sponsors manage all aspects of meal service, including preparing and transporting the meals or identifying a meal vendor to prepare and transport the meals, establishing protocols for serving the meals during a specified time frame, and ensuring that the meals meet the USDA nutrition requirements. For a variety of reasons, including lack of food preparation facilities, many park and recreation agencies may be unable to prepare their meals onsite – in these cases meals are often prepared at a nearby kitchen, loaded into temperature controlled carrying containers, and delivered to the meal service sites.

Common meal program sponsors include:

School Districts. School districts are a most common OST meal program sponsor because many of them already provide free and reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). NSLP meal sponsors are encouraged to also provide meals through the Afterschool Snack Program and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). School districts are

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

Community: Hoxie, Kansas

Innovative Approach: Park and Recreation Agency as First-Time Meal Sponsor

In the summer of 2018, the Hoxie Rec Commission sponsored the first-ever summer food service program in not just the community of Hoxie, but in all of Sheridan County. By working with the Kansas Department of Education's Child Nutrition and Wellness team, the commission was able to submit all necessary paperwork, and bring the program to three meal sites in Hoxie: the IMPACT Community Center; the Sheridan County Public Library; and the Hoxie City Swimming Pool. To complement the federal meal programs, Hoxie partnered with the Western Prairie Food, Farm, and Community Alliance, an eight-county group dedicated to guiding the Northwest Kansas region toward investing more in local foods. The Hoxie Recreation Commission collaborated with the Alliance to incorporate a community garden into the summer meal program, allowing kids and families get to come together to participate in the gardening process, and sustainably supplement meal programs with the produce and help make farm-to-table a reality in their community. Leaders in Hoxie realized that oftentimes government programs targeted at benefiting low-income populations can have a stigma associated with them, which could be a barrier to participation. Emphasizing that this programming is for the entire community—benefiting both the city's health and economy—helped alleviate the stigma.

effective meal sponsors because they are well-known in the community, they have existing meal preparation and storage equipment necessary for a summer meal program, and, for those that are currently enrolled in NSLP, the application process for SFSP is simplified to allow for essentially a carryover of existing services.

Non-profit Organizations. Another common type of OST meal program sponsors are non-profit organizations. Examples of types of non-profit organizations that sponsor OST meal programs include, but are not limited to:

- » Anti-hunger Organizations
- » Anti-poverty Organizations
- » Boys and Girls Clubs
- » Churches
- » Food Banks
- » Low-income housing programs
- » YMCAs
- » Youth Development Organizations

Local Government/Park and Recreation Agencies. Park and recreation agencies and other local governmental agencies can also serve as meal sponsors. Due to the relatively narrow scope of meal services provided by park and recreation agencies and other local governmental agencies, partnerships are crucial for them to effectively serve as a meal sponsor. Partners can assist in coordinating meal preparation, meal distribution, educational and enrichment activities, and awareness campaigns.

CHALLENGES

When identifying a meal sponsor, it is important to be aware of the following:

- » Being a meal sponsor requires annual training mandated by USDA. If you are partnering with another organization as the meal sponsor, they may require staff from the park and recreation agency to attend the training as well, especially if it will be the agency's first time serving as a meal site.

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

Community: *Arkansas City, Arkansas*

Innovative Approach: Park and Recreation Agency as Meal Sponsor and Meal Vendor

Arkansas City is a town filled with generational history, varying industry, and a number of community assets contributing to a successful summer and afterschool meal program. Arkansas City Recreation provides meals to hundreds of kids each week, changing the health climate of the community. As both the sponsor and the food vendor, Arkansas City is responsible for the administrative aspects of the program, including tracking numbers and submitting for reimbursement, as well as ensuring that meals meet nutrition standards and food safety guidelines. Agency leaders have perfected an efficient way of menu planning, prepping and storing meals, and using tools – like coupons – to stretch funds and make the most out of federal reimbursement. Arkansas City also uses a method of tracking sheets to make the sign-in process quick and easy for kids.

- » Communication among all collaborating organizations is key. Ensuring that responsibilities and expectations are clear at the onset of the program will reduce the possibility of miscommunication regarding meal planning, meal distribution, meal service, and program monitoring.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

In order to determine if your community has existing OST meal programming, you can contact your local school district, since school districts frequently serve as OST meal sponsors. If the school district does not sponsor a meal program, they would likely know whether one exists through another organization. Other organizations to contact about OST meal programs are the Boys and Girls Clubs, food banks, YMCAs, or state departments of education. In some smaller communities, there may not be an existing program, in which case the park and recreation agency can either serve as the sponsor or provide the support necessary for a school district or other organization to begin one. When approaching school districts about collaborating to establish an OST meal program, recognize that some school districts eliminated their summer sessions following the economic downturn; however, with the recovered economy and improved budgets, schools may be open to re-establishing their summer programming.⁷

The links below provide additional information about meal sponsor eligibility:

- » Recruit and Maintain Sites and Sponsors (No Kid Hungry) (<http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-meals/recruit-and-maintain-sites-and-sponsors>)
- » USDA SFSP Administration Guide (https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/sfsp/SFSP_Admin_Guide_Sept2016.pdf)

MAKING MEAL SITES ACCESSIBLE

APPROACHES

One of the primary barriers to participating in OST meal programs is accessibility of the meal service location. Accessibility refers to meal site locations that are within safe walking distances to children's homes, providing transportation assistance for children who are not within walking distance, and utilizing spaces that are well-known in the community and regularly frequented by children. Examples of OST meal program models to address meal site accessibility include:

EMERGING EVIDENCE

Innovative Approach: Implementation of Meal Programs

A 2018 evaluation of park and recreation agencies in rural, suburban and urban communities serving meals through the USDA child nutrition programs identified both differences and similarities in meal program implementation. Best practices that were identified in rural communities included: building purposeful partnerships with like-minded stakeholders, offering structured programming that incorporates a variety of enrichment activities including nutrition education, gardening and social-emotional learning, engaging families, and putting practices in place that establish program fidelity. Non-rural communities implemented new strategies including mobile feeding and activity programs, opening additional drop-in meal sites, and engaging teens and older youth as program leaders.

While one of the most successful characteristics across cohorts was the ability to engage partners, what was interesting was how the partnerships differed. In rural communities, agencies partnered with the school district, economic development organizations, cooperative extension offices, local youth sports programs, youth resource centers, libraries and universities. In urban and suburban communities, agencies built new partnerships with local farmers markets, the healthcare community and city housing authority to expand access to meal programs and healthy foods. OST providers in any community type should work to build purposeful and effective partnerships that help to support and reach overall community goals.

Bus Transportation Services: Some communities are not able to provide meal service within walking distance for all children that would benefit from the meals. Park and recreation agencies may be able to partner with organizations such as public transportation agencies, school districts, or colleges and universities to use vehicles either through donation or a rental agreement. Bus routes should be thoughtfully planned in order to reach a maximum number of children. For example, certain neighborhoods or apartment complexes in the community may have a high concentration of families that would be interested in participating, and those areas can be designated as bus pick-up spots. For more information about transportation strategies see: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/sfsp/SMT-Transportation.pdf>

Mobile Feeding Sites: In some cases, and most often in rural communities where the service population is spread out over a wide geographic distance, a solution to increasing accessibility is to bring the meals to the children rather than bringing the children to the meals. In order to implement this model, you will need to invest in meal transportation equipment, including cooling units and warming units, a vehicle for transporting the food, and possibly mobile seating options such as a converted bus or a trailer unit with picnic tables and seating. Meal service must take place at approved stops in the community and during approved times. For more information see: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-meals/launch-a-mobile-meals-program#mobile-meals-toolkit>

Pool Parks and Recreation Centers: Park and recreation agencies have demonstrated success in providing meals to a large number of children throughout the summer by serving at their pool parks and recreation centers. Pools and recreation centers are popular locations for children to spend time during the summer, whether they are visiting with an organized group or on their own. Pool parks often have designated usage schedules that can coincide with meal service times, while also providing venues for fun and engaging physical activity. Serving a meal or snack at a pool park encourages the association between healthy eating and physical activity, as well as provides a meal during a time when children will be hungrier and more motivated to participate.



Tapping into Existing Youth Groups: You may also find success in partnering with other community youth programs that can provide transportation to the meal site around lunch or snack time in order to provide meals for children in their programs. Examples of partnering youth programs include Boys and Girls Clubs, sports teams, youth resource centers, summer school programs, and day care programs. Some benefits of these types of arrangements include the ability to more accurately predict the number of meals to prepare based on the attendance schedule of the visiting youth programs and that other youth programs can depend on the food that is served at the meal site rather than providing their own.

CHALLENGES

When selecting meal site locations, it is important to consider the following:

- » Unsafe sidewalks or road crossings may prevent children who are within walking distance from participating in the meal service. When selecting meal service locations, it is important to take into consideration parents' perceptions of safety and reasonable walkable distances.
- » Extreme weather, such as heat, wind, or rain, may make outdoor meal service difficult during the summer time. While you may not be able to mitigate all weather-related events, it is important to take into consideration the availability of shade, protocols for high wind or rain events, and meal preparation quantities for when turnout might be low due to weather.
- » Staff capacity and/or volunteer support to provide appropriate supervision of youth during out-of-school time programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Access has been recognized as one of the most common barriers, both in terms of children attending programs and for programs to transport meals to feeding sites.⁸ In order to address this barrier, some financial investment may be necessary, whether that is from in-kind support from a community partner, a reduced rate charged to the meal sponsor, or the award of grant funding.⁹ When selecting which model(s) might work best in your community, consider what resources would be necessary to implement it. Some sources of grant funding or special loan opportunities that focus on supporting meal service program activities aimed at children include:

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

Community: Chanute, Kansas

Innovative Approach: Mobile Feeding Site

Chanute, Kansas is a rural town located in 110 miles east of Wichita, Kansas. Chanute Park and Recreation Commission has a recreation facility that is centrally located and has a pool park but their building does not have a commercial kitchen for preparing meals. They decided to partner with the local school district, which operates a 16-site mobile feeding program during the summer months, to serve as one of the feeding sites. The Recreation Commission arranged for the mobile feeding program to arrive at the recreation facility at the time that the pool is open for swim lessons and free swim. In order to comply with regulations of SFSP mobile feeding sites, all meals must be served and consumed at the designated mobile feeding site stop. The vehicle that transports the meals also has a trailer extension that was converted into covered picnic seating for the children to use while eating. The trailer stops in the parking lot of the recreation facility, directly adjacent to the pool park.

- » USDA Rural Development, Community Facilities Programs (<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs/community-facilities-programs>)
- » ConAgra Brands Foundation, Community Impact Grants (<https://www.cybergrants.com/conagra/welcomepage/>)
- » Costco Wholesale, Charitable Contributions Grants (<https://www.costco.com/charitable-giving.html?ddkey=http:CatalogSearch>)
- » H.E.B., Community Investment Program (<https://www.heb.com/static-page/Apply-for-Community-Investment>)

In order to implement the transportation models, for example the bus services and the mobile feeding sites, it is important to conduct an assessment of the community to identify areas that have the most need. This can be accomplished through a preliminary needs assessment or ongoing evaluation and monitoring. Taking a systematic approach to understanding the needs and perceptions of families in your community will ensure that the resources that you invest in transportation are serving the most number of children. Some resources related to this include:

- » Mobile Meals Toolkit (No Kid Hungry, Best Practices) (<http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-meals/launch-a-mobile-meals-program#mobile-meals-toolkit>)
- » Summer Meals Evaluation and Participant Engagement Toolkit (Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon) (https://www.summerfoodoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2017EvaluationandParticipantEngagement_FINAL.pdf)

PROVIDING NUTRITION EDUCATION

APPROACHES

Research shows that children who are not engaged in educational and enrichment activities in the summer are at risk of summer learning loss, sometimes referred to as the “summer slump.”⁵ Providing educational activities about nutrition is an effective way to combine learning exercises with lifelong skills for healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. A major barrier to healthy and nutritious eating for people of all ages is education about what foods are healthy and how to prepare them in a way that is affordable and tastes good. Introducing children to a variety of fruits and vegetables

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

Community: Fairfax, Virginia

Innovative Approach: Tapping into Existing Youth Groups

Leaving a lasting mark on the community was also important in Fairfax, Virginia. Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) partnered with local non-governmental organizations (NGO) to provide meals and programming for homeless children. Through the partnership, non-governmental organizations identified children in homeless shelters, who were then included in FCPA summer programs that offer summer meals. FCPA worked with six organizations to place 56 participants in 245 sessions of camp, plus 163 sessions of extended care. This was the first summer that locations were available that provided free meals in the community and it helped fuel a more than 200% increase in children served.

expands their knowledge of food and encourages curiosity. OST meal programs should incorporate nutrition education through utilizing evidence-based curricula, providing nutrition and agricultural expertise through local cooperative extension offices, and engaging children in gardening activities.

Evidence-based Curricula: USDA-sponsored nutrition education curricula include USDA MyPlate; Grow it, Like it, Try it!; and Fuel up to Play 60. Other USDA-supported and evidence-based curricula include:

- » Color Me Healthy (North Carolina State University Extension) (<https://www.colormehealthy.com/>)
- » Commit to Health, Foods of the Month (NRPA) (<https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/commit-to-health/foods-of-the-month/>)
- » Discover MyPlate: Nutrition Education for Kindergarten (USDA) (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/discover-myplate-nutrition-education-kindergarten>)
- » Feeding Without the Fuss (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) (<https://food.unl.edu/free-feeding-without-fuss-powerpoint>)
- » Fuel up to Play 60 (National Dairy Council, NFL, and USDA) (<https://www.fueluptoplay60.com/>)
- » Grow it, Try it, Like it! (USDA) (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/grow-it>)
- » Jump Into Foods and Fitness (Michigan State University Extension) (https://www.canr.msu.edu/jump_into_foods_and_fitness_jiff/)

Cooperative Extension Services. Cooperative Extension Services are funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as part of their rural development services. Extension services are located across the U.S. and employ experts on agriculture, waste management, child development, and nutrition, among other things. Local extension agents can provide nutrition education activities, such as food demonstrations and education worksheets, and access to and education about gardening.

Gardening Activities: Engaging children in gardening is an effective way to teach children about healthy foods and increase their curiosity to try new fruits and vegetables.¹⁰ Children can participate in and observe the growing process over the course of the summer and are able to taste some

EMERGING EVIDENCE

Rural vs. Urban/Suburban Approaches

Innovative Approach: Nutrition Education Through Hands-on and Curriculum-based Methods

A 2018 evaluation of NRPA's Foods of the Month nutrition education curriculum and associated impacts found positive trends in fruit and vegetable consumption across rural, suburban and urban communities. Interestingly though, the type of success that agencies experienced differed between rural and non-rural cohorts. In rural communities, agencies prioritized nutrition education through gardening, and bolstered this through assets such as plentiful green space to start gardens and local partners from the agriculture community. Non-rural communities trended toward higher success through more traditional afterschool and summer program learning, including MyPlate activities, experiential activities and other activities through the Foods of the Month curriculum. In the rural cohort, campers reported an increase in consuming 20% more fruits and 11% more vegetables through the course of the program, and there was a nearly 74% increase in knowledge about planting food gardens. The non-rural cohort reported consuming nearly 18% more vegetables and nearly 20% more fruit. Both cohorts saw an increase in this education extending outside of the program, with reports of kids sharing their new knowledge with their families. In the non-rural cohort, there was an 18% increase of campers talking to their parents about cooking healthy food. In the rural cohort, there was a 10% increase in campers going grocery shopping with their parents, after learning about healthy foods in OST programs.

produce along the way. Gardening curriculum may include topics such as the use of greenhouses in urban agriculture or how to make a personal or community garden.

CHALLENGES

When developing programming around nutrition education, it is important to consider the following:

- » Due to certain climates and crop harvests, you may not be able to demonstrate fruit or vegetable growth from seed to harvest in your garden activity during one summer. Plan accordingly to either have some produce already growing or to pair observing the growing process with fully ripened produce that does not come from the garden.
- » Some evidence-based curricula must be purchased or printed. When planning your meal program, be sure to budget for the cost of nutrition education materials.
- » Engaging parents in healthy eating and nutrition conversations can be a challenge and lack of involvement by parents can lead to unhealthy eating environments at home. Encourage parental involvement by providing information handouts to children for them to bring home.
- » Availability of fresh produce may be limited in both urban and rural communities, so that children may have limited access to the types of fruits and vegetables experienced through participation in gardening activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

OST programs, whether they operate as half- or full-day programming or a drop-in meal site, should incorporate nutrition education because it is an important component in creating a healthy eating environment⁴ As described above, there are many resources for delivering accurate nutrition information to children in an engaging way. Nutrition education curriculum should meet the following standards:

- » Evidence-based curricula that is grounded in current nutrition science
- » Does not support a particular food industry or sector
- » Delivered by qualified (trained) personnel

PROGRAMMING TECHNIQUE

Nutrition Curricula: Foods of the Month

Innovative Approach: Combine Nutrition Education with Physical Activity

Activity: MyPlate Relay

- » Print out food and activity playing cards. Each card has a picture of food (e.g., glass of milk, grilled chicken, baby carrots) and an activity (e.g., jump, walk backwards, dance). Place the cards at the starting line.
- » Print out a MyPlate diagram and place it at a distance across from the playing cards.
- » Divide up the children into teams and line them up in rows at the starting line. Each row should have their own stack of playing cards.
- » The first child draws a card and performs the activity in a forward motion towards the MyPlate diagram. Once they arrive at the diagram, they place the playing card in the corresponding quadrant based on the food item on the playing card. They then return to the starting line, performing the same activity, and tag out to the next teammate.
- » The team that collects at least one playing card per MyPlate food group first, wins!

Source: Commit to Health, Foods of the Month Curriculum, Fun Being Active. Available at: https://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpaorg/Grants_and_Partners/Recreation_and_Health/Commit_to_Health/Foods_of_the_Month/June/June-Fun-Being-Active.pdf

While evidence-based curricula should be implemented as designed for maximum effectiveness, it may be difficult for drop-in meal sites to dedicate the time and space to conducting an educational lesson. In these instances, focusing on one food at a time, like NRPA's Foods of the Month Curriculum, can capture children's attention by exposing them to new fruits or vegetables that they may not have known about or eaten before. This type of food presentation is also a good opportunity to engage stakeholders in the community, for example a local farmer can bring fresh produce to share, a cooperative extension agent can share informational handouts, or a local food purveyor can give a food demonstration for children and parents to watch.

PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

APPROACHES

Making physical activity components central aspects of the OST program teaches children the importance of an active lifestyle, provides an engaging atmosphere for children, and may reduce the emphasis on participating in a program for low-income families. Promoting the program as something that all children can participate in, regardless of need, has been shown to reduce stigma that is sometimes associated with free and reduced price meal programs.¹¹ Park and recreation agencies that offer half-day or full-day programming have more opportunities to incorporate organized play into their schedule. Physical activity can include open gym time, organized games such as kickball or pickle ball, obstacle courses, relay races, corn hole, and access to playgrounds, open fields, tennis courts, and swimming pools. In addition to these formats, physical activity can also be incorporated in to the OST meal program in the following ways:

Instructor-led Sports Lessons. Invite sports coaches or teenagers/young adults to visit your OST meal program and provide instruction in a certain sport. The intent is to introduce the sport to new players, and an incentive for coaches and instructors may be recruitment of new players. Examples of sports instruction include cheerleading, tennis, swimming, and karate.

Physical Activity Centered Community Events. Wherever possible, incorporate physical activity into community events and use those events to promote the OST meal program. This will draw children in to the activity and afford the opportunity to disseminate information about the meal

PROGRAMMING TECHNIQUE

Implementing Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Standards

Innovative Approach: Formal Commitment to Health and Wellness Policies

In 2014, NRPA made a formal commitment to the Partnership for a Healthier America to engage park and recreation-based, out-of-school time (OST) sites in the implementation of the National Afterschool Association's Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) standards. The HEPA standards address the quality of food, physical activity, nutrition education programming and the environment within OST sites, ensuring that kids in grades K-12 have the best possible health and wellness outcomes. The HEPA standards include serving a fruit or vegetable at every meal, providing water at all times, limiting screen time, ensuring that youth are meeting the daily recommendations for moderate to vigorous physical activity (60 minutes in a full day program, 30 minutes in a half day program) and providing evidence-based nutrition education. NRPA partners with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG) to ensure that sites have the tools needed to assess their OST sites, set goals and create an action plan to meet the standards, track their progress and access resources to support their efforts. After five years of partnership, 2,080 sites are implementing the HEPA standards through Commit to Health, reaching nearly 500,000 youth annually. Agencies can pledge to implement the standards and work towards making these standards part of a site-wide wellness policy that create sustainable and long-term health impacts.

program in a setting with reduced stigma that may otherwise be associated with free and reduced-price lunch programs. One example of this approach is an end of the summer field day hosted by a park and recreation agency. Parents and families should be encouraged to attend the field day and participate in the activities.

CHALLENGES

When developing new ways to incorporate physical activity into your program consider the following:

- » While all OST meal programs should encourage physical activity, it is important to acknowledge that not all children enjoy participating in organized sports. Be creative with ways to encourage movement that are not based in sports or competition.
- » Free play during OST meal service may not provide enough engagement for some children to participate. Some OST meal programs have observed a difference in children's engagement in physical activity between the option of free play and structured activities. Limited staffing or space may prohibit your program from implementing organized activities, but you can invest in safe, portable playground equipment that children can use on their own.
- » Although it is typically not challenging for park and recreation OST sites to ensure kids meet the daily recommendations for physical activity, it can be helpful to take a step back and evaluate the activities that are taking place to ensure that they are age-appropriate, inclusive, keeping kids moving instead of standing, and are fun.
- » In a shorter program (half-day or afterschool program) it may be challenging to dedicate 30 minutes of program time to physical activity while navigating competing activities like homework help, mentoring, STEM, or nutrition education. A solution to that can be to add short physical activity bursts throughout the day, adding up to 30-minutes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

In order to encourage participation in physical activity, children must be excited about offered activities. The best way to discover what activities will be popular is to ask the children themselves. For example, one park

EMERGING EVIDENCE

Evidence of the Effect of Offering Activities at USDA Demonstration Sites

Innovative Approach: Incentives for Meal Sponsors to Provide Activities

USDA funded five demonstration programs in 2010 and 2011 to research promising approaches to increasing participation in SFSP.¹² One of the five demonstration programs was designed to determine if the statewide availability of grants to SFSP providers who offer new site activities that are designed to draw and sustain attendees have a meaningful impact on participation/coverage in the chosen demonstration state. USDA selected Mississippi as the demonstration state, and the state awarded grants up to \$5,000 per meal site per summer to plan and implement enrichment activities through the purchase of equipment for physical activity/games and other expenses. By the end of 2011, Mississippi had observed an increase in the average daily attendance increased by 18.7% from 2009 to 2010, and again from 2010 to 2011.¹² This demonstration showed the efficacy of providing engaging activities for children in order to increase attendance.

and recreation agency that arranges sports lessons during the OST meal program asks children what activities they are interested in and sets out to find an instructor willing to participate. In addition, funding opportunities from the state, as well as other local and nation non-profit organizations, can be used to invest in equipment, materials, or the development of physical/enrichment activities.

DISSEMINATING PROGRAM INFORMATION

APPROACHES

The best way to increase participation in your OST meal program is to implement effective marketing strategies in areas of the community that are most frequented by children and families.⁸ Examples include:

Flyers at School. Disseminating information directly to children while they are in school is an effective way to provide information to children and families. Schedule the distribution of information around the time when parents make plans for their children's summer schedules. This is typically around early spring but may differ depending on your community.

Local News and Radio. Local news outlets are typically receptive to promoting the OST meal program for free or for a nominal fee since it is a program that benefits the public.

Social Media. Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, are all free methods of program advertisement. For some communities, the park and recreation agency may not have a strong website presence and may instead find it easier to monitor and post OST meal program messaging on their Facebook page.

CHALLENGES

When planning promotional efforts for your program consider the following:

- » Despite strong efforts like distributing flyers and promotion through various channels, some OST programs still experience lower attendance rates than expected, especially for newer programs. Gaining recognition in the community takes dedication and commitment. The more families that become aware of the program, the more they will look forward to participating on a regular basis and suggesting it to others; however, it can take time for the program to build up a reputation in the community.



» Communities with diverse populations should consider producing materials in languages other than English in order to ensure that all eligible families are aware of the OST meal programs. Providing materials in multiple languages requires a translator and possibly additional printing costs. Engage individuals from different cultural backgrounds who may be able to provide translation assistance and can serve as a bridge to communicating with those communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Reach out to local news sources, like the newspaper, neighborhood newsletters, and radio stations to promote your program free of charge, or for a nominal fee, as a public service announcement. You can also disseminate small flyers around the community to high-frequented places such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, and local retailers and restaurants that post community announcements. In addition to these active promotional efforts, word of mouth is often cited as the most effective tool for program promotion.⁷

Links to other resources and toolkits for promoting your program:

- » USDA SFSP Raise Awareness Resources (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/raise-awareness>)
- » Online Outreach (No Kid Hungry) (<http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-meals/promote-summer-meals#online-outreach>)

PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

APPROACHES

Program implementation requires collaboration across multiple sectors, which also supports sustainability. As described earlier, partner types may include local government, social service organizations, cooperative extension offices, school districts and private businesses, among others. Engaging multiple organizations in out-of-school time programming builds a network of support for youth development activities in the community. As funding sources fluctuate and priorities shift, stakeholders within this network can help fill gaps that may be left when resources are low.

Health and Wellness Policies. One of the best ways to ensure continued progress towards your program goals related to reducing food insecurity,



fighting hunger and preventing obesity is to establish a health and wellness policy for your OST meal program and/or your park and recreation agency as a whole. For more information visit: <https://www.healthiergeneration.org/take-action/schools/wellness-topics/policy-environment/local-school-wellness-policy>

Create a Diverse Funding Base. Garnering financial support from multiple sources improves the programs ability to successfully sustain itself over long periods, despite changes in political and economic factors.¹³ There are three strategies for developing a diverse funding base, including: maximizing federal, state, and local revenue; developing new revenue; and taking advantage of in-kind support. For more information about funding opportunities go here: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/food-access/6/funding>

Engage the Community. Creating community buy-in and support from local leadership can be an effective way to sustain programming. Leadership support at the local level is critical to ensure that programs will be adequately budgeted for in the future. Invite local leadership (mayor, city council members, etc.) to visit the program, interact with the children, and meet with the families that are benefitting from it. Local media attention is another effective way to spread the word about the work you are doing and the impact the program has on your community.

Track Program Impacts and Share them Broadly. To sustain your program, it's imperative that you collect data around the community-wide and individual impacts being created. OST programs should track program metrics that will track progress over time and resonate with supporters (local leadership, donors, grant-makers, community members) to make the case for continued efforts. Metrics that can be considered include:

- » Number of jobs created
- » Number of meals served
- » Number of partner engaged
- » Number of youth/families served
- » Number of youth provided nutrition education and physical activity
- » Demographic information around who is participating in the program
- » Stories of impact



CHALLENGES

When planning for sustainability consider the following:

- » USDA child nutrition funding is based on a per meal reimbursement rate, which typically only covers the cost of the food. One of the most common barriers to sustaining SFSP programs is maintaining staff and facilities during summer months, especially when participant enrollment is lower than the school year due to lack of transportation or family schedules.
- » Rural communities may face an additional barrier in sustaining OST meal programs due to limited eligibility for funding based on demographic requirements. For example, some communities may be ineligible for federal nutrition funding because their concentration of low-income students may not meet the threshold. Programs such as SFSP allow multiple metrics to be used for determining eligibility when school-based data is not sufficient. For more information go here: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/areaeligibility>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Spread the message of prioritizing healthy eating and physical activity to inspire others in the community to do so as well, and partner with others who share this same mission. The cross-sector nature of implementing OST meal programs, especially during the summer when schools may not be able to implement programs on their own, bring additional organizations and allies to the mission of keeping children engaged and fed during out-of-school times. One example of this was when the local government of a small community invested in a complete building renovation to support the park and recreation department OST program, after the program had received grant funding to purchase large scale appliances. In another community, the county leveraged grant dollars to appropriate additional funding during a mid-year budget review, to purchase more laptops, new vans, and initiate an “After School Healthy Snack Program,” which had a direct impact on increasing the number of children served that summer.

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

Community: Mesa, Arizona

Innovative Approach: Creating a Diverse Funding Base

Mesa Public Schools had several school sites that were going to be closed for an upcoming summer due to construction or repairs to the building and, therefore, were not going to be able to host summer meals at the usual sites. With the support from the NRPA / Walmart Foundation grant, the City of Mesa offered to utilize parks to host the lunch programs. With the funding, the City of Mesa purchased food service equipment necessary to travel from four park sites and maintain adequate food temperatures. The City of Mesa also purchased 10x10 pop up tents for additional shade to help with the outdoor sites.

CONCLUSION

Park and recreation agencies can play an important role in providing or supporting out-of-school time (OST) meal programs during summer months, afterschool, and other seasonal or holiday breaks. The USDA Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) continues to be underutilized compared to the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which operates during the school year, due to barriers related to organizational capacity, lack of transportation, and decreased school participation. Through both governmental and non-governmental funding opportunities a large amount of resources, reference guides, and toolkits have been developed to encourage SFSP implementation based on best practices and promising approaches. Those references are shared throughout this best practices guide. The key to designing an OST meal program for your community is to select approaches that leverage existing assets and address known barriers. Once you select those best practices and promising approaches it is important to tailor them to your unique community, considering the geographic landscape, the expertise of your stakeholders, and the resources available at your park and recreation agency. USDA child nutrition programs require long-term sustainability planning in order to consistently provide the much needed service in their community. It is crucial for OST meal sites and sponsors to consider how their efforts contribute to the long-term goals of eliminating food insecurity.



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