

FINAL REPORT

Evaluation of the NRPA Healthy Out-of-School Time Grant Rural Cohort

JANUARY 28, 2019

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Overview

In May 2018, with funding from the Walmart Foundation, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) awarded grant funds to 30 sites to support children's health through park and recreation out-of-school time programs. The NRPA Healthy Out-of-School Time Grant program was implemented between May 2018 and December 2018, and included ten awards to programs in rural communities in Colorado, Kansas, and Mississippi. Grant funds were designated for expenditures to help park and recreation agencies achieve the stated goals of the program: increase access to healthy meals served to children; provide evidence-based nutrition literacy to children; and implement nutrition and physical activity standards to create more sustainable programs. Grantees used the funding for expenses such as program marketing, purchase of food service equipment, program transportation, and staffing. Grantees were prohibited from using funding to purchase meals.

Out-of-School time 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.¹ Through these programs, children can access free meals after school, on weekends, during school holidays, and throughout the summer, times during which students are at-risk of missing out on 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 in rural households, children are more likely to experience food insecurity than households in metropolitan areas.^{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.

The NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis (NORC), on behalf of NRPA, conducted an evaluation of the ten rural cohort grantees. The evaluation was conducted simultaneously with program implementation. The purpose of the evaluation was to answer three primary questions:

- What are the specific program characteristics and models that lead to increased participation in meal service programs in rural communities?
- What does sustainability mean for local park and recreation agencies implementing nutrition programs?
- What key partnerships exist in rural communities to address hunger gaps and access to out-of-school time sites?

¹ Food Research and Action Center. (2018). *Rural hunger in America: Afterschool meals*. Available at: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/rural-hunger-in-america-afterschool-meals.pdf>

² Coleman-Jensen, A., Nord, M., & Singh, A. (2013, September). *Household food security in the United States in 2012* (Economic Research Report No. ERR-155). Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

³ Food Research and Action Center, 2018

⁴ Hatcher, D.W., FitzSimons, C.W., & Turley, J.R. (2014). The role of out-of-school time in reducing hunger and preventing obesity. *Afterschool Matters*.

Introduction

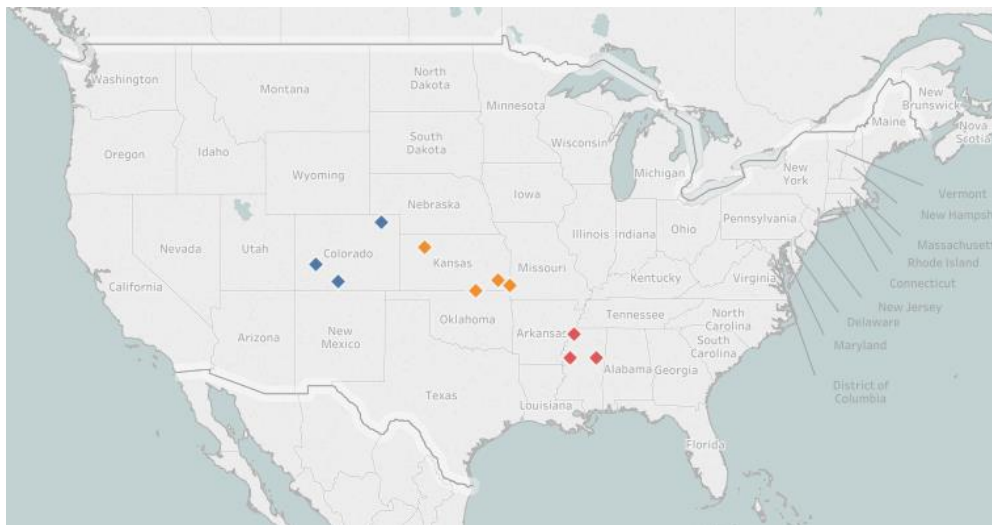
The NRPA Healthy Out-of-School Time Grant program was implemented between May 2018 and December 2018 and included summer and afterschool meal service programs. The three main objectives of the grant were to:

- Increase the number of healthy meals children receive through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) or the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) during out-of-school times;
- Provide nutrition literacy to children and families that creates behavior change, including increased consumption of fruits and vegetables; and
- Implement healthy living practices and policies aligned with the healthy eating and physical activity standards that increase access to healthier foods and support a healthy environment.

NRPA awarded funds to local government agencies, including city governments and parks and recreation agencies. The grantees either served directly as the USDA meal program sponsor or partnered with a local school district or social service organization that served as the sponsor. The ten rural cohort grantees were located in Colorado, Kansas, and Mississippi (Exhibit 1). The grantees were:

- Colorado
 - City of Monte Vista Kids Connection
 - Montrose Recreation District
 - City of Sterling
- Kansas
 - Arkansas City Recreation Commission
 - Chanute Recreation Commission
 - Hoxie Recreation
 - City of Pittsburg
- Mississippi
 - City of Indianola
 - Starkville Parks and Recreation
 - Tunica Parks and Recreation

Exhibit 1. Map of Rural Cohort Grantees



Evaluation Methodology

NORC designed an evaluation based on Donabedian’s conceptual framework for program evaluation, which combines an analysis of the structure, process, and outcomes of programs (Donabedian, 1966).⁵ Recognizing that program outcomes, such as behavior change, health improvement, and well-being are long-term measures, the Donabedian framework focuses analysis on program structures and processes, based on the concept that programs that are well structured and implemented using strong processes and with program fidelity are more likely to achieve those longer term outcomes. As such, this evaluation is designed with a focus on the efforts of grantees to establish process and structural elements that are likely to lead to the ultimate desired outcomes among the communities served.

Using this framework, NORC analyzed qualitative and quantitative data from grantee applications, grantee interim progress reports, and grantee final reports. Qualitative data were also collected through key informant interviews and focus groups (Table 1). NORC conducted site visits to three of the grantees, one in each state (Chanute, Kansas; Monte Vista, Colorado; and Tunica, Mississippi), to conduct two key informant interviews, one grantee staff/partner focus group, and one participant parent focus group, and to collect observational data. For the seven remaining grantees, NORC conducted two key informant interviews per site by telephone. Key informants consisted of meal service directors, meal sponsor directors, volunteers, and community stakeholders. All interview and focus group protocols were reviewed and approved by the NORC Institutional Review Board. NORC conducted thematic analysis of the qualitative data using NVivo data analysis software. The analysis focused on the structures, processes, and outcomes of the individual grant programs. Quantitative data related to meal service numbers were tracked at baseline, interim, and final reporting periods.

The following report presents the results from the evaluation divided by theme including administrative structures, key partnerships, meal service structure, implementation challenges and facilitators, and program outcomes.

Table 1. Primary Data Collection Sources

Data Collection Method	Number of Interviews/ Focus Groups	Number of Respondents
Grantee Staff/Partners Focus Group	3	23
Participant Parent Focus Group	3	12
Key Stakeholder Interviews ⁶	19	19
TOTAL	25	54

⁵ Donabedian, A. (1966). "Evaluating the Quality of Medical Care." *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 44 (1): 166-203.

⁶ Only one key informant was available for an interview on the Chanute site visit.

Program Structures

The following section describes the grantees’ program structures including administrative structure, partnerships, meal service, structured programming, and community context.

Administrative Structure

The grantees were all governmental agencies, as required by the funding opportunity. A majority of the grants were awarded directly to the parks and recreation department or commission, but three were awarded to city governments. A majority of the grantees partnered with school districts and social service organizations to serve as sponsors of one or more of the child nutrition programs for out-of-school time meals, including Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) or the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Child nutrition program sponsors are responsible for applying for the program, obtaining required trainings, preparing the food, serving the food, and tracking service numbers. Four of the sponsors were school districts, four of the sponsors were social service organizations, and two of the grantees were themselves the sponsors (Table 2). The types of social service organizations that served as meal sponsors included an anti-poverty community action group, a food pantry, a child welfare organization, and a faith-based organization. The grantee partnerships included: Indianola Parks and Recreation with Sunflower-Humphreys County Progress; the City of Monte Vista Kids Connection with Care and Share Food Bank for Southern Colorado; Starkville Parks and Recreation with Southern Foundation for Homeless Children; and Tunica Parks and Recreation with the Tunica 10 Point Coalition. Furthermore, the grantees in Hoxie and Pittsburg had not previously offered summer meal service. Pittsburg Parks and Recreation partnered with a local school district that had an existing meal service program to serve as a meal site for the first time. Hoxie Recreation also offered a summer meal service for the first time, but there was no existing summer meal service in the community; as a result, the parks and recreation department received support from the local government to begin one.

Table 2: Grantee Meal Program Sponsor Types

Grantees	Parks and Recreation	School District	Social Service Organization
Arkansas City	•		
Chanute Recreation Commission		•	
City of Indianola			•
City of Monte Vista Kids Connection			•
City of Pittsburg		•	
City of Sterling		•	
Hoxie Recreation	•		
Montrose Recreation District		•	
Starkville Parks and Recreation			•
Tunica Parks and Recreation			•

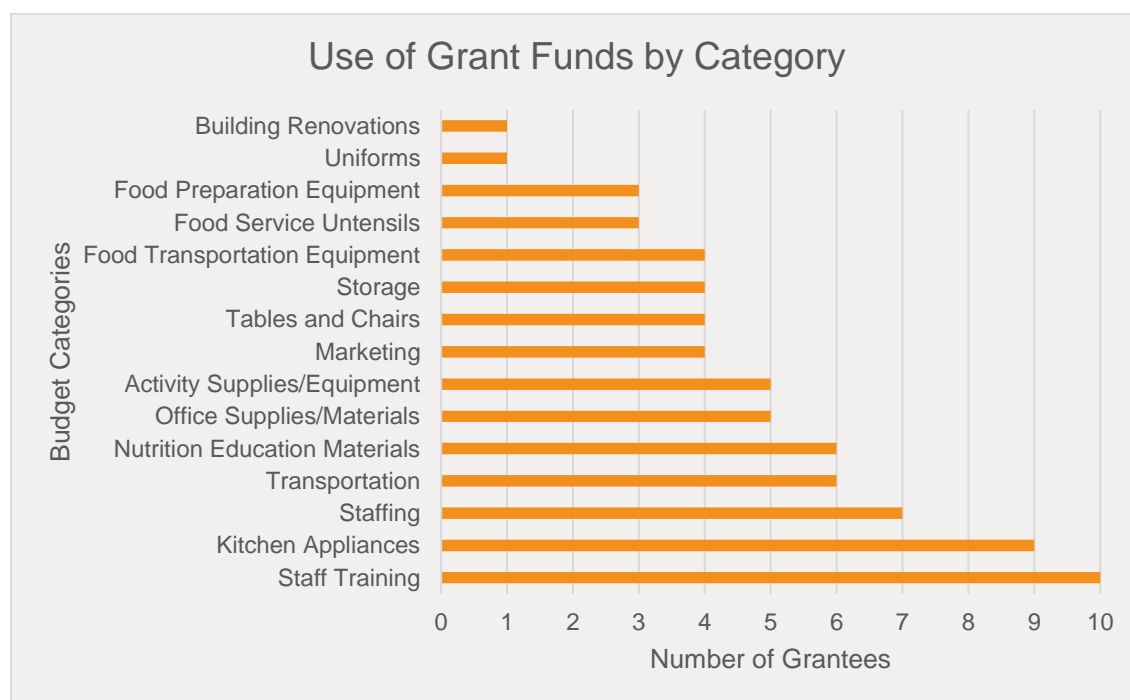
Implementation staff consisted of parks and recreation staff and meal service staff. The parks and recreation staff included executive directors that oversaw park and facility operations, program

coordinators that were responsible for out-of-school time programming for the children, teachers, aides, and interns. Meal service staff, employed by the meal sponsor site, consisted of a nutritional director, cooks, servers, and delivery drivers. The number of food service staff varied by the number of food service sites. For example, one sponsor that was responsible for four feeding sites employed 22 staff while another sponsor with only one feeding site employed two staff. Arkansas City Recreation Commission had staff that were responsible for coordinating the food service, and in the summer an additional cook and two servers were hired to support the eight-week lunch service program. Hoxie Recreation, which started a meal service program for the first time, hired two food service staff for the summer. Depending on the site, staff were either full-time, part-time, or volunteers. One grantee, Hoxie Recreation, offered one-time stipends to help compensate volunteers for their time and effort. Some grantees relied heavily on volunteers, which included parents, teenagers, and other community members.

Use of Grant Funds

Grant funding could be used for expenses such as program marketing, food service equipment, program transportation, and staffing but not to purchase meals. The grantees reported program expenses, which coalesced into 15 budget categories, in their final program reports. Some of the budget categories were common among a majority of the grantees while some were reported by only one grantee. For example, all grantees used funding on staff training, including the grantee training event hosted by NRPA in Wichita, KS at the beginning of the grant period. All but one of the grantees used funds on kitchen appliances, such as commercial sized refrigerators and stoves, as well as smaller appliances like a toaster and a miniature refrigerator. Other common expenses included staff compensation, transportation, nutrition education materials, and activity supplies and equipment. Exhibit 2 shows a breakdown of the types of budget categories reported in the grantee final reports and the number of grantees that used funds on each of those categories.

Exhibit 2. Use of Grant Funds



Data Source: Grantee Final Reports, Budget section

Partnerships

Grantees partnered with a variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations to implement their programs. As described above, a majority of the meal sponsor agencies were school districts and social service organizations that had experience implementing meal programs. In addition to partnering with meal sponsors, the grantees partnered with organizations and agencies to transport children to their feeding sites, conduct extracurricular activities, conduct food demonstrations, deliver nutrition education, and provide field trip opportunities. Three types of partners emerged as valuable collaborators across all of the grantee sites: youth programs; cooperative extension offices; and transportation services.

Youth Programs. Grantees frequently partnered with community youth programs to provide transportation to the meal site at lunch time in order to provide meals for children in their programs. Examples of partnering youth programs included Boys and Girls Clubs, sports teams, youth resource centers, summer school programs, and day care programs. Another way that youth programs supported meal service sites was by recruiting teenagers who could serve as meal service volunteers and role models. For example, one grantee invited a cheerleading team to visit and teach the younger participants cheer routines. The cheerleaders were able to also eat a free meal.

Cooperative Extension Service Offices. 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. Some of the grantees partnered with local extension agents to provide nutrition education activities, such as food demonstrations and education worksheets, and access to and education about gardening. One grantee partner explained, *“A lot of folks think of extension [services] as crops and livestock but don’t think about the health portion of it, especially in rural farming communities. In my district it has been my biggest push to try and get that information out about being able to partner with coalitions and groups to get the extension education component out there to people [to promote] health and nutrition and wellness.”*

Transportation Services. Some grantees partnered with organizations that provided transportation either to the meal service site and/or for field trips. Lack of transportation is a common barrier for children to attend out-of-school time meal programs. Some factors that contribute to this in rural areas include lack of public transportation options and fewer parks or facilities that are within walking distance for children when their parents are unavailable to drop them off. One of the meal program sponsors, a social service organization, included group transportation pick-up and drop-off directly to the child’s house for all registered participants in their program to reduce this barrier. Other grantee approaches to addressing transportation issues included:

- Rental of a local university bus to transport children to the lunch meal service;
- Partnering with a county school district to provide bus transportation between recreation sites that do not serve meals and recreation sites that do; and
- Utilization of a local public transportation service that provided free rides to children to the meal service sites.

Partner and supporting organizations assisted the grantees in six main categories of support, including: visiting the program to conduct an activity or special presentation; boosting attendance by bringing youth programs or groups to participate in the meal service; acting as the meal sponsor, meal site, or assisting with meal service; conducting nutrition education activities; promoting the out-of-school time program in the community; and providing transportation services. A complete list of types of partners and supporting organizations, along with their primary roles, referenced during interviews and focus groups is provided below (Table 3).

Table 3: Grantee Partner Types and Roles

Partner Types	Activity Guest	Attendance	Meal Sponsor/Site /Service	Nutrition Education	Promotion	Transport Service
Animal Control	•					
Bank			•			
Board of Supervisors					•	
Local Government					•	
College/University					•	•
Cooperative Extension				•		
County Health Task Force					•	
D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education)	•					
Day Care		•				
Economic Development Organization				•	•	
Library	•			•		
Local Farmer	•				•	
Museum	•					
Newspaper					•	
Public Transportation						•
Radio					•	
School District		•	•			•
Social Service Organization			•	•		•
Teacher			•			
Youth Resource Centers		•	•	•		
Youth Sports Team	•	•				

Meal Service Locations

The grantees and their meal sponsors implemented meal service programs at a total of 23 sites over the grant period. Four of the grantees implemented the meal service at only one site, three grantees implemented at two sites, one implemented at three sites, one implemented at four sites, and one implemented at six sites. All but two of the grantees used their indoor recreation facility as one of their meal service sites. Grantees with multiple meal sites also utilized elementary schools, other recreation facilities, libraries, and public pools as meal service sites. The two grantees that did not serve at their recreation facility, Hoxie Recreation and Sterling Parks and Recreation, served at one of their outdoor park facilities instead (Hoxie Recreation does not have an indoor recreation facility and was in the process of renovating a building in their downtown district). One of the grantees, Chanute Recreation Commission, used a mobile meal service strategy using a delivery van that stored all of the food in temperature controlled containers, and a covered picnic table and bench seating on a mobile trailer bed,

allowing them to provide meal service in the parking lot of their recreation facility, as well as 15 other sites.

Meal Service Schedule

All of the grantees served a lunch time meal at one or more of their meal service sites during the summer. The lunch service time ran from one hour to one hour and forty-five minutes, and children could arrive at any time during that designated service window to participate in the free meal. Additionally, two grantees served an afternoon snack and three grantees served a breakfast meal during the summer. The number of meal service days per week depended on the meal sponsor's schedule and the parks and recreation facility schedule. In Hoxie, meal service days were limited to two per week due to staff capacity. Serving a breakfast meal in addition to lunch was often cited as beneficial for the community. One grantee said, *"We noticed that the breakfast program alone has curbed some of the behavior issues. When the kids are acting out they are probably hungry and don't know how to control their emotions."*

Structured Programming

Parks and recreation facilities often offer supervised programming for children during the summer months. Seven of the grantees designed their meal service programs to coincide with their summer half-day or full-day programming, while three served meals that were only available on a drop-in basis. While all of the meal sites could serve any child that attended the meal service regardless of enrollment in the program, the sites with structured summer programming had a more stable attendance rate throughout the summer.

The structured summer programs were offered at daily, weekly, or multi-week rates. The cost of the programs ranged from \$4 per day to \$15 per day, and varied as to whether parents needed to pay an upfront cost for the entire program duration or could pay on a daily or weekly basis. Some grantees described scholarship options for families that qualified. For example, Monte Vista Kids Connection noted that 85% - 90% of their children attended for free based on income through a scholarship program provided by the county social services department. Montrose Recreational District described a sponsorship program through which individuals in the community volunteered to sponsor children what were unable to pay the program fee.

All of the grantees offered a variety of education and physical activities to the children that attended their summer programs and meal services. The grantees with half-day or full-day summer programs had more opportunities to provide educational experiences for the children than the grantees that only served meals at drop-in sites due to the amount of time that the children were at the site. Providing opportunities for physical activity was a main focus for all of the grantees. Some of the grantees noted that they placed a bigger emphasis on physical activities this year than they had in the past because of the Commit to Health pledge, but others said that physical activity had always been a main component of their program. Grantees offered 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 physical activity, grantees arranged educational enrichment opportunities like field trips to the zoo, museums, libraries, and sand dunes. Grantees also incorporated nutrition education into their program through food demonstrations, gardening activities, and games, such as those provided by the Commit to Health Foods of the Month curriculum and other USDA-promoted programs.

Access to Youth Programs in the Community

Interview respondents and focus group participants described enrichment opportunities for youth in the community during summer and afterschool times. In some communities, the parks and recreation

department offered the only opportunities for children to engage in physical activity and educational activities. Some respondents described the value that the parks and recreation programs bring to children's lives and how it goes beyond child care or physical activities by also teaching socialization skills and discipline, and reinforcing the value of education and creativity.

Sports programs comprised the majority of programs available to youth during summer and afterschool times, some of which were overseen by the parks and recreation department. Other organizations that offered various types of youth programming included Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, and local youth resource centers, some of which also served as meal sponsor sites. Another program that was available in Hoxie was 4-H, a youth development program delivered by Cooperative Extension that offers in-school and out-of-school time projects in areas that include health, science, agriculture, and citizenship.

Barriers for youth to access programs included cost and lack of awareness. As reported earlier, out-of-school time programs ranged in price from a few dollars a day to over ten dollars a day. This was described as a barrier for some families, especially those with multiple children. Another common barrier cited was a lack of awareness or familiarity with the program. Grantees described the various methods of program promotion, such as distributing flyers at schools, posting announcements on Facebook, and posting advertisements in the newspaper, but many respondents noted that word-of-mouth seemed to be the most effective promotional strategy.

Additional barriers were tied to challenges in accessing public spaces. For example, respondents explained that a frequent barrier to children walking to a park unaccompanied is the lack of safe street crossings. One respondent described, *"The closest park is across 14th street, but my son is nine so he wouldn't cross that street unless he had me with him. It's close but he is too young. And on the other side of 14th street there are no parks."* A few respondents reported that children that are not enrolled in out-of-school time programs or are not able to access public spaces for play time are typically left at home alone during the day while their parents are at work. Respondents reported concern for children that remain at home throughout the summer because they engage in sedentary activities such as playing video games, watching T.V., or engaging in social media.

Access to Healthy Food in the Community

Interview respondents and focus group participants described the accessibility of food in their community, and specifically healthy food options. Some unique assets of the rural grantee communities were that they were typically farming communities with a general knowledge of agriculture and open spaces for private gardens. However, many respondents explained that the agricultural knowledge and appreciation for cultivating fruits and vegetables does not always get passed down to the younger generation. Most of the communities had publicly accessible gardens and access to farmers markets, but in some cases the farmers markets were in the next town over. Chanute Recreation Commission described the growth of their main street farmers market over the past few years, highlighting that the vendor stalls are now consistently full, the extension office comes to do food demonstrations, and they recently were approved to accept electronic benefit transfer (EBT) food assistance cards. All of the grantees reported that their communities also sustained a food pantry that was able to provide food for those in need.

All of the focus group participants described barriers to accessing food, especially healthy food, in their community. Some of the barriers included long travel distance to a grocery store, lack of public transportation, limited availability of quality produce, limited availability of a variety of produce, high price, limited hours of operation, limited availability of non-fast food dining options, and a lack of education about nutrition and cooking. A primary factor was cost, which is a significant barrier for low-income populations. Below are examples of these commonly cited barriers.

Distance. In some towns, the nearest quality grocery stores were up to 15 – 30 miles away. Sometimes there were stores that were closer, but they were typically smaller, like convenience stores, and did not have a full produce selection. In most of the smaller communities, public transportation was either not available or not a practical option for getting to the grocery store.

Availability. Multiple respondents described a lack of variety of produce available in most rural grocery stores, and that the variety can be even less in the winter.

Price. Some respondents explained that the cost of fresh produce can be prohibitive. For example, in one town, a discount grocery store was replaced by a locally owned store and the prices increased. Respondents also described how cheaper items are typically the less healthy options. This is consistent with rural studies that show that distribution challenges in rural towns can correlate to higher sales prices.

Dining Options. In small towns there are often fewer dining options, many of which tend to be fast food outlets. Respondents explained that due to accessibility and price, fast food restaurants are popular among some residents.

Education. Some respondents described lack of education about nutrition and food preparation as a barrier to shopping at grocery stores. They noted that many individuals lack skills related to meal planning and budgeting.

Program Processes

The following section describes the grantees’ program processes including promotion, transportation, meal preparation and distribution, nutrition education, physical activity, implementation facilitators, and implementation challenges.

Program Promotion

The grantees all reported similar methods for program promotion. The most common promotion method was distributing flyers to children at school before the school year ended. This was the most direct way to reach children and parents. Other common promotion methods were posting advertisements in local newspapers, guidebooks or newsletters, radio stations, handing out flyers at community events, posting flyers in local businesses, and mounting signs. Oftentimes, grantees were able to post advertisements in newspapers and on the radio through a partnership with the local media outlets. In addition, all grantees used some form of online or social media promotion on websites, Facebook, or Twitter. Some grantees reported that their outreach via social media was their most successful promotion strategy.

A few grantees described unique promotional methods that they implemented in their communities. They included wearing promotional t-shirts, setting up a booth at back-to-school night, printing bookmarks to distribute at the library, and including a flyer in utility bills. One theme that emerged was the importance of face-to-face interaction in promoting the program (Exhibit 3). Below are three examples:

Exhibit 3: Examples of Face-to-Face Promotion Strategies

Community Kick-off Event	Distributing Flyers on Snack Bags	Door-to-Door Advertising
<p><i>“We had a big kick-off event which got a lot of media attention...We kept an active relationship with media so they knew what was going on.”</i></p>	<p><i>“On fourth of July, we did a little fun event where a business donated bags of popcorn ...I took some lunch tickets and stapled them to popcorn bags and drove around that night and handed them out to families as they were out celebrating.”</i></p>	<p><i>“The people actually got a chance to see who was serving their children. It felt more like a personal invitation.”</i></p>

Transportation to Meal Sites

Transportation to the meal sites varied among the grantees. About half of the grantees reported that a majority of the children that attended their programming and meal sites were dropped off by their parents. In Arkansas City, the grantee reported that approximately 40% of the children that attended their drop-in lunch service and snack at the pool walked. In Hoxie, the grantee said that a majority of the children walked to the lunch and snack service at the pool park. Programs often made a conscious decision to select an easily accessible location, even when it required transporting the meal from the kitchen to an outdoor service area, as was the case with Hoxie Recreation. Ultimately, the ability for children to walk to the meal service site depended on the accessibility of the park facilities in relation to residential areas.

Some grantees made transportation a major focus of their programs. For example, Starkville Parks and Recreation used roughly half of their grant funding to rent a bus from Mississippi State University to use during the summer to pick up children and transport them to the feeding site. The grantee rented one bus

for 5 hours every day, 11:00 am – 4:00 pm, to pick up children at four designated bus stops, bring them to the feeding site, and take them home afterwards. Three of the bus stops were located at or near apartment complexes that were specifically chosen to assist families that would use the service. Another transportation partnership was between Tunica Parks and Recreation and the local school district. Tunica County School District provided two buses throughout the summer to transport children between parks and recreation facilities. There are four parks and recreation facilities in Tunica County, but only two facilities served the summer meal program. The buses were used to transport children from a facility that did not serve lunch to one that did. This allowed children to attend the facility that was closest to their house without missing out on a meal opportunity. Indianola Parks and Recreation’s implementation partner, Sunflower-Humphrys County Progress, offered door-to-door transportation to children that are enrolled in their summer program, while Montrose Recreation District leveraged a partnership with the public transportation system to provide transportation free of charge to children attending the meal service.

While some grantees arranged for transportation to their programs, others relied on informal partnerships and arrangements with other youth programs in the community to bring children to the meal service. Examples included Boys & Girls Clubs, day care programs, summer school programs, and sports teams. There were several benefits to this arrangement including:

- Grantees could more accurately predict the number of meals to prepare based on the attendance schedule of the visiting youth groups;
- Other youth programs could depend on the food that was served at the meal site rather than providing their own; and
- It increased awareness of the program so that children could participate during the other days of the week and bring their siblings.

Meal Preparation and Distribution

Most of the parks and recreation facilities did not prepare their meals onsite. Some reasons for this included not having a kitchen, meals being served at an outdoor site, or the meal sponsor having an existing meal preparation process. The meal sponsors were responsible for all aspects of meal service, including preparing the food, transporting the food, serving the food during a specified time frame, and ensuring that the food met the USDA nutrition requirements. Most often, the meals were prepared at a nearby school kitchen, loaded into temperature controlled carrying containers, and delivered to the meal service sites.

Whether preparing the food onsite or transporting it, some of the sites developed systems that worked well for their program implementation. Some grantees found that cold meals and snacks worked best for their programs, allowing them to efficiently pack up the lunches using pre-portioned amounts for easy transport to the meal service site. Other sites found that hot meals were better for their community and planned accordingly. One important aspect of meal preparation was menu planning. One of the meal sites in Arkansas City developed a two-week rotational menu of hot lunch options that included some of the children’s favorite dishes while consciously incorporating a variety of fruits and vegetables. Pittsburg Parks and Recreation’s meal sponsor, the local school district, had experience serving the summer lunch program in the past but had never served at a non-school outdoor site before and had to adapt the menu after the first week to account for food transport.

Nutrition Education

To meet the objectives of the grant, and adhere to the Commit to Health pledge, all of the grantees implemented a nutrition education component. A majority of the grantees either developed new educational components or significantly enhanced what they had been providing in the past. Grantees

used the educational materials from Commit to Health, USDA MyPlate, and other resources such as The OrganWise Guys, Power Up Panther, and Kids a Cookin’. The grantees were grateful for the nutrition education focus and the resources provided because they received positive feedback from children and parents about those activities. The grantees observed the children’s interest in learning about different fruits and vegetables and saw improvements in their knowledge retention throughout the summer.

Four of the grantees brought in external educators for the nutrition curriculum. Hoxie Recreation and Indianola Parks and Recreation both relied on the local Cooperative Extension agents to provide food demonstrations and distribute additional educational materials like puzzles, fact sheets, and informational pamphlets. In Arkansas City, the grantee brought in a high school teacher to conduct the Foods of the Month and the Discover MyPlate activities. In Starkville, vendors and agencies attended the kick-off and close-out events to distribute nutrition educational information.

One of the most common and well-received nutrition education activities was visiting community gardens. Six of the grantees incorporated trips to a garden, presentations by gardeners, or started their own garden project. This activity taught the children about the gardening process, which they were able to observe over the course of the summer, and they were able to enjoy the experience of eating produce from a garden. Some of the sites were able to teach the children about fruits and vegetables they had never been exposed to before.

Three of the grantees reported targeted efforts to engage parents in nutrition education. Indianola Parks and Recreation provided a weekly newsletter for parents, which included information about healthy foods and recipes. One of the staff members at Tunica Parks and Recreation gave a Cooking Matters presentation at a local store and received positive feedback from the parents. The parents that attended the presentation described being appreciative for the information, noting that eating healthy can be costly so it is important to know tips for shopping on a budget. Lastly, Sterling Parks and Recreation reported that they made a more concerted effort this year to use the USDA and Commit to Health nutrition education materials at their park programs. They said that they used it to “*break the ice*” for parents and that they received “*a lot of compliments about how much more involved*” they were.

Other examples of grantee nutrition education activities are included in Table 4.

Table 4: Examples of Nutrition Education Activities

Objective	Activity
Demonstrate amount of sugar in common beverages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Determine the equivalent amount of tablespoons of white sugar for various beverages. ■ Spoon the amount of white sugar into a plastic bag for each beverage. ■ Display the bags of sugar and the bottles or cups of beverages. ■ Ask kids to match the bag of sugar with the corresponding beverage.
Increase healthy habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Set-up a weekly goal sheet ■ Give examples of healthy goals, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Drink at least one glass of water each day ○ Eat two types of fruit each day ■ Review the goals at the end of the week
Understand meal proportions of MyPlate recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Teach MyPlate meal proportions using free USDA education resources. ■ Discuss examples of lunch options that align with MyPlate proportions. ■ Challenge the children that bring in their lunch from home to adhere to the nutrition guidelines.

Objective	Activity
Teach healthy recipes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use the food of the month as an ingredient in a recipe demonstration. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Berries: yogurt and berry parfait ○ Peppers: healthy dip with pepper spears

Physical Activity

Physical activity, whether through structured games or open play time, was a main component of all programs. As parks and recreation agencies, increasing physical activity opportunities for children and adults is a main part of their mission, and the Commit to Health pledge provided an additional incentive to ensure that they were incorporating physical activity in as many ways as possible. The grantees with structured summer programming had designated times for physical activity during the day, including playing outside for an extended period of time, taking shorter breaks in the middle of the day, organized sports, and access to the pool. Four of the grantees either served their meals at a pool or had a pool within walking distance of their meal site. All of these grantees described the pool as a highly frequented place in the summer, weather permitting, and described that it was a successful location for serving a meal as a result. Some of the grantees also provided creative physical activities such as line dancing and cheerleading, which they reported that children enjoyed.

Incorporating Family

All of the grantees described their desire to include parents and families in their meal service and nutrition education but that it was challenging due to parents’ work schedules, especially during the summer months. Four of the grantees said that they do not currently have any efforts aimed at incorporating parents or families in their programming. As with all of the meal service sites, parents are welcome to eat with their children, either bringing their own food or paying for a meal for themselves, and siblings are welcome to join as well and can participate in the free meal as long as they are under age 18. Three of the grantees said that they provide resources about healthy nutrition, such as recipes, for children to take home to their parents. Three of the grantees, in addition to sending home resources, also planned community events that were designed to engage parents. One example was the Montrose Recreation District summer expo that was held at the end of each summer program session. Parents were invited to come to the expo to learn about the activities and crafts that their children had completed that summer. Another example was the Pittsburg Parks and Recreation end of summer field day celebration, which encouraged family to celebrate the end of summer with physical activity.

Implementation Fidelity

Eight of the ten grantees reported that they implemented their programs as intended. These eight were the grantees that had participated in meal service programs in the past. Although they noted minor day-to-day adjustments, the grantees described that their programs were largely implemented as planned. Grantees also noted that the longer they had been implementing the meal service program, the more streamlined their processes were. The other two grantees established meal service programs for the first time as part of this grant, and as such needed to make some adjustments in their implementation. Pittsburg Parks and Recreation had to adjust their menu after the first week of meal service due to the meal sponsor, the school district, never having served meals at an outdoor park. The process of transporting the food from the kitchen to the park presented some challenges to their regularly scheduled menu, which they served at their other four school-based sites. The menu adjustments were related to which types of vegetables and preparations were ideal for loading into storage containers and serving remotely (e.g., the baked potato wedges did not stay crispy).

Hoxie had a more significant change in their implementation plan. At the time of the grant application Hoxie had purchased a downtown building to convert into an indoor recreation facility. However, at the time of program implementation the building renovation was not complete, requiring Hoxie to conduct their meal service at their outdoor pool park. While this was successful location, it required changes to the menu and process for meal packing and transport.

Implementation Facilitators

The grantees reported several factors that enabled them to implement and expand the reach of their meal service program. The most common factor was collaborating with partners in the community that support their mission to provide healthy meals and activities to children in the community. For example, the stakeholders in the Chanute focus group credited a previous grant, called Pathways to Healthy Kansas, for providing a strong foundation of departmental involvement and strategic planning. In general, partnerships enabled the grantees to expand the range of services and activities they offered, including gardening opportunities, borrowing physical activity equipment, and borrowing a bus for a field trip. Many of the grantees said that they did not have a structured schedule for communicating with their partners but rather communicated on an ongoing basis. This worked well for the grantees and stakeholders as they spent time visiting the different sites, conducting the meal service, or organizing various activities.

Grantees also described the hard work and dedication of their program staff and volunteers. Some of the grantees that have been implementing their meal service programs for many years said that experience was a key factor in their ability to streamline processes and find solutions. Other noted staff characteristics that facilitated program implementation were being knowledgeable about nutrition, and being creative and energetic. All of the grantee staff highlighted the importance of caring deeply about their mission to provide nutritious meals to children in the community, many of whom might count on that meal as their only option for breakfast or lunch that day. One of the grantees said, *“The thought, in my heart and in my brain, that there is a child tonight, laying there, going hungry...I can sustain this program until I retire. Keep your eye on the prize.”*

Implementation Challenges

The grantees described several challenges to implementing their programs that were common across sites, including under enrollment, difficulty estimating how much food to prepare, and difficulty influencing eating habits outside of the program. As reported earlier, the grantees used a variety of promotional methods to recruit families to participate; however, in some communities, enrollment was lower than expected. A majority of the grantees said that they had the capacity to serve more children if there were greater interest. Some of the reasons for under enrollment as reported by the grantees included a lack of parent buy-in, lack of awareness of the programs, and the stigma associated with attending a meal program for low-income families. Some of the grantees reported seeing children in the community or even at the programming activity, but not participating in the meal service. In Hoxie, the grantee suggested that the lack of promotional materials offered in Spanish could be a factor in the lower than expected enrollment.

Most of the summer lunch feeding sites provided meals to both enrolled program participants and drop-in participants (“drop-ins”), while others served only drop-ins. Respondents explained that it was difficult to estimate how much food to make since the number of meals served would fluctuate, sometimes by up to 50 meals. Some factors that meal providers took into account when planning the meal service was which outside programs were planning on attending, whether families might be out of town on vacation, and the weather forecast.

Another implementation challenge was influencing eating habits outside of the program. All of the grantees were enthusiastic about the nutrition education component and said that the children enjoyed the nutrition activities, but that the community-wide food environment enabled unhealthy eating habits. For example, the vending machines in the recreation building had unhealthy options, the concession stands at the park had unhealthy options, and many of homes had unhealthy options. One of the biggest challenges that grantees faced was engaging the parents because many of them were at work when their children were in the programs.

Program Outcomes

The following section describes the grantees' program outcomes including meal service outcomes, children served, HEPA standards met, sustainability, stakeholder satisfaction, and recommendations.

Meal Service Outcomes

One of the three objectives of this grant program was to increase the number of healthy meals children receive through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) or the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) during out-of-school times. To measure the increase in the number of meals served, a baseline was established at the beginning of the program as number of meals served by meal program type in 2017 as well as the total number of unique children served through a meal program in 2017. Eight of the ten grantees had participated in out-of-school time meal programs in the past. Two of those eight grantees did not have data to report from 2017. Montrose Recreational District did not participate in the summer meal program in 2017, however, they did participate in 2016 and reported service numbers from that year instead. Chanute Recreation Commission supported a snack service at their pool park in 2017, but it was sponsored by the school district and Chanute did not have access to the meal service numbers. The two grantees that had not participated in meal programs in the past, Hoxie Recreation and Pittsburg Parks and Recreation, reported baseline service numbers of 0.

Meal program sponsors are responsible for tracking the number of meals served throughout the summer and/or school year and reporting them to the federal funding agency for reimbursement and accountability. Some grantees described their meal sponsors' method for tracking the number of meals served, however most were unaware of the exact methods used. One of the meal sponsors used a state-sponsored electronic tracking system and two used meal count tracking sheets at the time of service. As a requirement of this grant, grantees also tracked the total number of unique children served. Due to the combination of registered program participants and public "drop-ins" that participated in the meal programs, a majority of the grantees were unable to track exact counts of unique participants. Given the logistical challenges with tracking unique identities at meal sites that were open to the public, grantees were permitted to report estimates. Grantees that reported the exact number of children served provided meals through their registration-based programs, where drop-in participants were limited and therefore identifiable.

At baseline, the total number of meals served across the seven grantees that reported service numbers was 322,762 meals. All seven grantees served meals through SFSP, three served meals through CACFP and one served meals through NSLP. A majority of the meals were served through the CACFP program (170,291 meals), followed by the SFSP program (126,059 meals), and lastly the NSLP program (26,412 meals) (Exhibit 4). By the end of the grant period, referred to as follow-up, the total number of meals served by all ten grantees from May 2018 – December 2018 more than doubled compared to baseline, equaling 727,835 total meals served. In 2018, all ten grantees served meals through SFSP, four grantees served meals through CACFP (the same three from baseline plus one more), and three served meals through NSLP (the same one from baseline plus two more) (Table 5). The meal program type with the largest growth from baseline to follow-up was NSLP, of which the number of meals served more than tripled from 26,412 to 81,866 meals served. In 2018, grantees served the most number of meals through SFSP (340,042 meals), followed by CACFP (305,927 meals).

Exhibit 4: Total Meals Served at Baseline and Follow-up by Meal Program

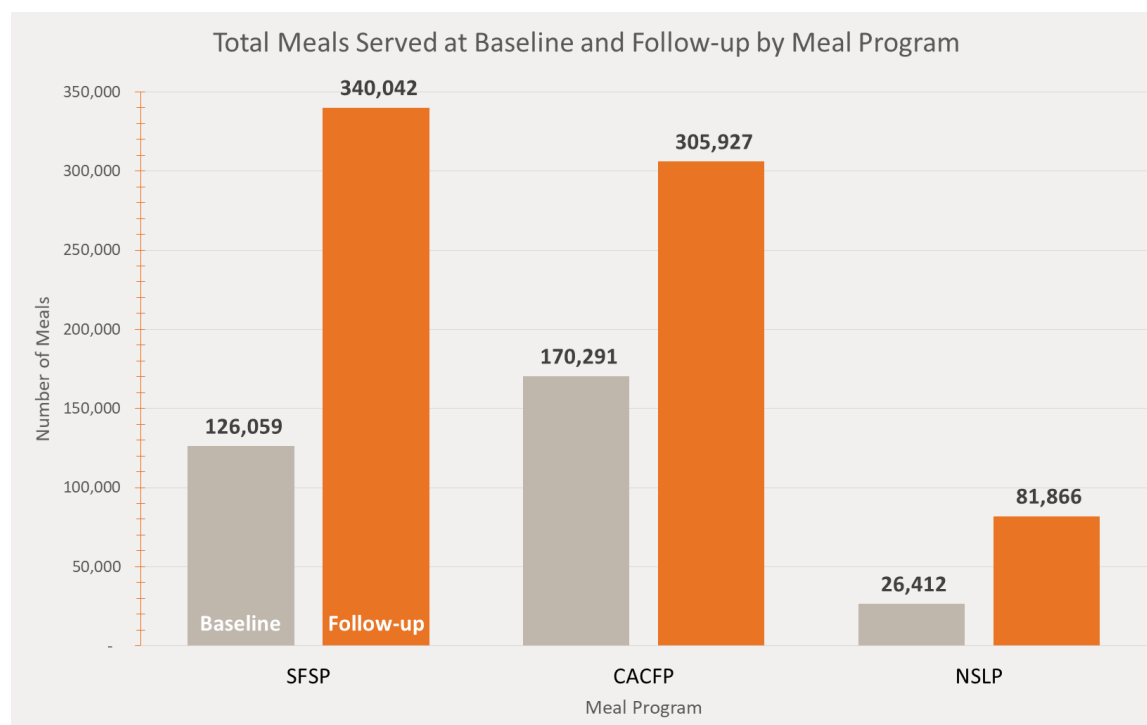


Table 5. Number of Meals Served by Grantee in 2018

Grantee	SFSP	CACFP	NSLP
Arkansas City Recreation Commission	30,202	4,592	--
Chanute Recreation Commission	2,845	--	--
Hoxie Recreation	1,189	--	--
City of Indianola	3,608	--	--
Monte Vista Kids Connection	2,207	6,757	--
Montrose Recreational District	4,274	--	--
City of Pittsburg	5,875	--	42,038
Starkville (Southern Foundation)	268,629	290,000	--
City of Sterling	6,728	--	39,613
Tunica Parks and Recreation	14,485	4,578	--
TOTAL	340,042	305,927	81,866

By the end of the grant program, the ten grantees combined served 8,749 more children in 2018 compared to baseline (Table 6). Seven of the ten grantees reported service numbers at baseline, and combined they reached 5,491 children. At follow-up, eight of the ten grantees served more children than they had at baseline (Exhibit 5). Starkville (Southern Foundation) had the largest increase, with 7,100 more children served from baseline to follow-up. Two of the ten grantees served less children at follow-up than they had at baseline; Montrose Recreational District served 116 less children and Sterling Parks and Recreation served 2,540 less children. In total, from May 2018 – December 2018, the grantees served free meals to 14,240 children.

Table 6. Number of Children Served by Grantee at Baseline and Follow-Up

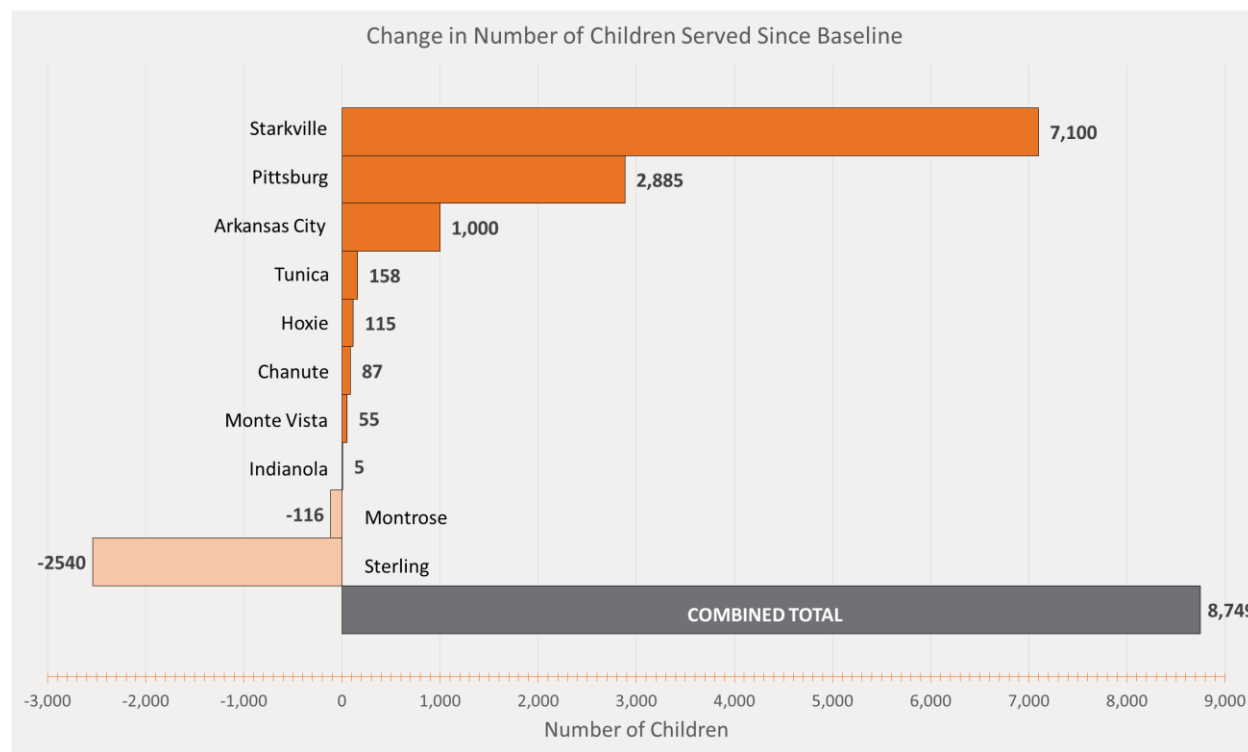
Grantee	Number of Children Served at Baseline	Number of Children Served at Follow-up	Change
Arkansas City Recreation Commission	500	1,500	1,000
*Chanute Recreation Commission†	--	87	87
*Hoxie Recreation	--	115	115
*City of Indianola	60	65	5
*Monte Vista Kids Connection	263	318	55
Montrose Recreational District§	250	134	-116
*City of Pittsburg	--	2,885	2,885
Starkville (Southern Foundation)	500	7,600	7,100
City of Sterling	3,630	1,090	-2,540
*Tunica Parks and Recreation	288	446	158
TOTAL	5,491	14,240	8,749

† Chanute facilitated a snack service at their pool park in 2017 but does not have the service numbers for that service. They did not serve a meal through their summer recreation program in 2017.

§ Montrose Recreation District did not have a summer feeding program in 2017 so they reported baseline values for 2016.

* Grantee reported values are estimates.

Exhibit 5: Change in Number of Children Served Since Baseline



Impact on Children Served

The grantees described their estimated average daily service numbers during the grant period. The number of children served each day varied depending on the number of children that attended the structured programming and the number of drop-ins that day. A majority of the structured summer programs had relatively consistent attendance because the parents relied on it as a scheduled summer activity. However, attendance tended to decrease on Fridays, around holidays, and later in the summer. The number of drop-in participants each day depended on the outside youth programs that were planning on attending that day, weather conditions, and random variation. A majority of the grantees served an average of approximately 30 to 50 children each day, three of the grantees served an average of 80 children a day, and two of the grantees served over 200 per day.

Many of the grantees reported that some of the children relied on the meals that they received through the program, with some describing how the programs supported specific family needs. For example, one grantee said that they heard a child say, “*Can I take this [food] home later because my mom doesn’t have money for more snacks?*” Another grantee described the need in the community for a meal service program, saying, “*I think it provided a kind of safety net for [our community] because poverty rates are going up.*” The grant program was especially impactful for one of the grantees that started a summer meal program in their community for the first time. Hoxie Recreation explained that without the grant opportunity, they probably would not have started a summer meal program. While the meal service location changed from the originally planned location of a new recreation facility downtown to the library and the pool park due to delays in building construction, the grantee noted that they exceeded their estimated service numbers. The anticipated number of children served was originally 25 per day, but the more central location of the pool park allowed for 40 children per day.

Grantees that had experience implementing meal programs in the past were aware of meal service locations and times that could increase attendance. For example, Arkansas City Recreation Commission said that they initially decided to expand their snack program to the pool park because they noticed that a lot of children spent time there during the summer. Similarly, Chanute Recreation Commission altered their lunch service time, which is served nearby the pool, to occur just before the pool opens. The adjustment to service time was more convenient for the children that were already planning on being at the pool. Aside from location and service time, a common observation among grantees about how to increase the number of children served, from both long-running programs and relatively new programs, was to be persistent with your messaging and to “give it enough time to be embraced.” Many grantees noted that they had observed increases in service numbers from year to year, as the reputation of their program grew in the community.

Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) Standards

As a component of the Commit to Health pledge, the grantees tracked their implementation of the Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) Standards. The grantees were surveyed at baseline and in their final report about the implementation status of each of the 19 standards as: met; not met, but in the process of implementing; not met, but planning to implement; and not met, with no plans to implement. At baseline, there were no standards for which all ten grantees reported that they met the standard (Table 7). The number of grantees meeting each standard ranged from five to nine, and a majority of those that had not yet met the standard were either in the process of implementing or planning to implement the standard. There were eight standards for which at least one grantee indicated that they had no current plans to implement that standard. In the final report, the number of standards for which all ten grantees reported that they met the standard increased to ten (from zero at baseline). Furthermore, the remaining nine standards were met by eight or nine grantees. Table 7 below shows the HEPA standards with 100% grantee compliance at baseline and at the final report.

Table 7. HEPA Standards with Full Grantee Compliance

HEPA Standard	All Grantees Met at Baseline	All Grantees Met at Final Report
Fruit or veg. at every meal	No	No
No artificial trans fats	No	No
Whole grain-rich	No	No
Non- or reduced-fat yogurt or cheese	No	Yes
Lean protein	No	No
USDA Smart Snacks in School snacks/desserts	No	Yes
Plain potable water, free	No	Yes
Plain low-fat milk, plain or flavored non-fat milk	No	No
100% fruit/veg. juice, no sweetener	No	No
No soda, sports drinks, juice drinks (elementary or middle)	No	Yes
No full-calorie soda or sports drinks (high school)	No	Yes
Non-caffeinated beverage	No	No

HEPA Standard	All Grantees Met at Baseline	All Grantees Met at Final Report
20% or 30 minutes of partial day; or 60 minutes of full day	No	Yes
Moderate or vigorous activity for 50% of physical time	No	Yes
Activity outdoors when possible	No	Yes
No access to TV or movies	No	No
Limit digital device use	No	Yes
Evidence-based nutrition ed. for youth	No	Yes
Evidence-based materials to family	No	No

Sustainability

Program implementation requires collaboration across multiple sectors and this diversification also supports sustainability. As described earlier, partner types included 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 step-in to fill a gap that may be left when resources are low. One of the grantees’ partners described the importance of communication between stakeholders to identify where needs exist and strategize a solution from pooled resources, for example borrowing a van for an afternoon field trip or kitchen space for a cooking demonstration. The partner explained, “*We are a small community and we have a section [of people] that can [afford things] and a lot that can’t and we have to be able to pull together to make it work for all of our kids.*”

Many of the grantees reported the use of the grant funding to purchase kitchen and service equipment as one of their strongest sustainability efforts. Equipment such as large refrigerators and freezers, warm and cold food transportation, industrial size cooking appliances, and tables and chairs enabled the grantees to serve more children in a more efficient way than they had in the past. With the systems in place to operate their meal programs, they will be able to continue to use the equipment to serve efficiently and increase their services.

Grantees noted that while the meal programs are funded through USDA, the reimbursement price per meal is just enough to cover the cost of the food. As a result, grantees rely on funding opportunities, like this one, to make enhancements that keep the program operational. Grantees said that one of the factors for keeping a meal program running was always looking out for and applying to funding opportunities, whether they are at the national or the local level. The outcomes from the funding opportunity may be one-time, but the benefits accumulate over time to make the program stronger and more sustainable.

Stakeholder Satisfaction

Partners and stakeholders said that they admired the grantee staff for providing a safe, enriching environment for children in the community during out of school times and addressing food access issues. One of the partners said, “*The staff pay close attention to the kids, and the kids trust them. Probably 75% of the kids here would claim [the Program Director] as a mother because of the respect they have for her.*” The parents also expressed appreciation for the programs and the experiences that their children had in the programs. They said that having a place that their children could go during the summer or afterschool that they could trust was helpful and helped prevent their children “*from being latch key kids.*”

The parents reported that they thought highly of the program staff and that they noticed improvements in their children’s behavior and knowledge of healthy nutrition.

Reflections and Recommendations

Grantees reflected on the implementation of their summer meal service programs and their appreciation for the opportunity to improve the scope and capacity of the activities and meals that they offered. The grantees embraced the Commit to Health pledge and enjoyed implementing activities to support nutrition education and increased physical activity. Some of the grantees said that they had tried to incorporate similar goals in the past but that this grant program gave them a structure by which to do it. Other grantees had not previously conducted nutrition education during their programming and were pleased to see the children respond to what they had learned. Some of the grantees also observed increased dialogue between children and their parents about healthy food choices. They were hopeful that these conversations could impact family choices about what to eat for lunch and dinner. Above all, the grantees were grateful for the opportunity to enhance their programs to serve more children in their communities.

Challenges persisted for grantees serving a maximum number of participants with limited resources. Multiple grantees noted the desire to serve more fresh fruits and vegetables in the meals, but this was often prohibited by cost, availability of fresh produce in the community, or logistics for preparing and serving the meals. A difficult balance for parks and recreation departments was access to both indoor facilities and outdoor play areas in an easily accessible location. The grantees whose meal sites were at an outdoor facility, like a pool park, were able to serve children that would access the park by walking. However, the lack of indoor facility space made meal transportation and nutrition education more difficult. In some cases, grantees whose meal sites were at an indoor facility either did not have access to adjacent outdoor space or were located in an area of town that was not accessible by walking.

Grantees also offered recommendations for implementing out-of-school time meal programs that have an emphasis on healthy eating and physical activity. Their recommendations were based on their experiences with implementing meal programs in their communities, which varied in demographics and proximity to larger cities, but were all relatively small and close-knit in nature. Below is a list of common recommendations:

- Incorporate a nutrition education component for parents to encourage an environment of healthy eating at home;
- Promote the program as an activity for all children to reduce stigma about participating in a program for low-income families;
- Promote the program at in-person community events, either hosted by the parks and recreation department or in partnership with the another organization, to increase community awareness; and
- Offer programming for different age groups so that activities can be age-appropriate and provide an opportunity for siblings of all ages to attend.

Conclusion

The NRPA Healthy Out-of-School Time Grant Rural Cohort provided meals and snacks to children in Colorado, Kansas, and Mississippi from May 2018 – December 2018 through three federally funded child nutrition programs, including SFSP, NSLP, and CACFP. Out of the ten grantees, four partnered with school districts and four partnered with social service organizations who served as the meal site sponsors, while two of the grantees were themselves the sponsors. Partnership and collaboration were important characteristics of the grant programs. Partners and supporting organizations assisted the grantees in a variety of ways, including: visiting the program to conduct an activity or special presentation; boosting attendance by bringing youth programs or groups to participate in the meal service; acting as the meal sponsor, meal site, or assisting with meal service; conducting nutrition education activities; promoting the out-of-school time program in the community; and providing transportation services. Through these partnerships, grantees implemented meal service programs at a total of 23 sites, with some grantees serving meals at multiple sites while others only served at one site. In addition to providing free meals, grantees implemented a nutrition education component to teach their participants about the importance of a healthy diet and how to achieve it. One of the biggest challenges that the grantees faced in implementing this program was engaging parents in the nutrition education activities in order to encourage healthy eating habits at home. Grantees also tracked their progress towards adhering to the Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) Standards. Enrichment programming, like nutrition education and physical activity, engaged the children in supervised, stimulating activities and helped to reduce stigma associated with participating in a program for low-income families. Throughout the course of the grant period, the ten rural cohort grantees served a breakfast, lunch, or snack to a total of 14,240 children. Many of the grantees reported that some of the children relied on the meals that they received through the program, highlighting the importance of these programs in these communities. Parents and stakeholders who participated in this evaluation expressed admiration for the grantee staff for providing a safe, enriching environment for children in the community during out-of-school times and addressing food access issues.