

Summer Food Service Program Sponsors' Perceived Benefits and Barriers Related to Participation in the Program

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Please note that this study was published before the implementation of Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which went into effect during the 2012-13 school year, and its provision for Smart Snacks Nutrition Standards for Competitive Food in Schools, implemented during the 2014-15 school year. As such, certain research may not be relevant today.

ABSTRACT

Objectives

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors' perceptions of benefits and barriers related to operating the program and to assess the practices they use to increase participation of eligible children.

Methods

Phase One of the research included telephone interviews with state agency directors and sponsors who oversee the SFSP. They were questioned about benefits and barriers that affect participation of the sponsors and eligible children. In Phase Two of the research, a questionnaire was developed and sent to 803 SFSP sponsors in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Southeast Region.

Results

A total of 316 completed surveys were used in data analysis. The average number of years sponsoring a program was 10; sponsors oversaw an average of 14.5 sites; and they served an average of 905 meals per day. Sponsors identified the large volume of paperwork as the primary reason an individual would not start an SFSP or would leave/discontinue an existing program. The most crucial resource in starting and operating a program was having adequate and appropriate staff to help with meal production. Transportation was the primary issue influencing participation by eligible children. Additionally, recommendations were made to help improve access to sites.

Application to Child Nutrition Professionals

SFSP sponsors need education and training in a variety of areas in order to improve their abilities as sponsors and to enhance program participation. Helping sponsors find additional funding sources may help boost the number of sites available to children. Most importantly, ways to enhance community connections and create activities that draw children into the program need to be developed.

INTRODUCTION

In 1968, Congress created the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to provide nutritious meals to low-income children when school was not in session, either during the summer or during a school break period of 15 days or more (Food Research and Action Center, 2005b; *Getting Good Nutrition*, 2005). Although the program originates at the federal level, funding is distributed by the state to SFSP sponsors, who are responsible for administering the program at the local level

(Food Research and Action Center, 2005b). Sponsors, who are reimbursed on a per meal basis,

are individuals or groups who are financially responsible for the operation of the program. A sponsor is typically a local school, government agency, non-profit organizations, or private individual (*Getting Good Nutrition*, 2005). The program is governed by detailed standard operating procedures in order to assure consistency and integrity within the program. It is the responsibility of the sponsor to assure that all protocols associated with the SFSP are followed (Tasse & Ohls, 2003).

In July 2004, nearly 2.9 million children were served in SFSP on an average day (*Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation*, 2005). However, recent data indicates that the program is being underutilized by eligible children. In 2000, only 14% of children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals participated in the program (Weedall & Hamilton, 2002). While the number of participants increased to 19% in 2004 (*Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation*, 2005), many program sponsors and child nutrition officials at the state and federal levels find these numbers discouraging.

As part of an attempt to increase participation in the SFSP, Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Richard Lugar (R-IN) proposed a program that would simplify the financial and administrative paperwork associated with the program. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) published regulations to reduce the paperwork burden using the Simplified Summer Food Program. This program allows SFSP sponsors to be reimbursed based on the number of meals served, rather than accounting for administrative and operating costs. Initially, 13 states and Puerto Rico enrolled in the program in 2001, and another six states began the program in 2005. (Bost, 2001; Food Research and Action Center, 2005a). In states that utilized the Simplified Summer Food Program it was found that the participation rate of sponsors and eligible children increased an average of 20.8% and 37%, respectively, in the 13 pilot states during the first four years of the program. In non-pilot states, the involvement of children in the SFSP an average of 25.3% (Simplified Summer Food Program, 2005).

A second program, the Seamless Summer Food Waiver, also has been used to improve participation by sponsors and, ultimately, increase the number of eligible children involved. This program was implemented in 2002 to help foodservice programs operated within school districts to make the transition between the school year and summer program easier. Through this program, rather than recreating accounting methods specific to the SFSP, the schools are allowed to run it as a continuation of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Although the initial reimbursement rates under the Seamless Summer Food Waiver were slightly lower than typical rates of the SFSP under the seamless waiver program, many sponsors said that the lower rates were offset by the cost savings associated with streamlining the operation (Tasse & Ohls, 2003). In June 2004, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act made the Seamless Summer Food a permanent option for schools (Food Research and Action Center, 2005c), although reimbursement rates still lag behind regular SFSP.

On a local level, most sponsors have tried to improve participation by eligible children using a variety of methods. Many programs utilized enrichment and recreational activities as a means of increasing children's involvement. The activities served as the primary means for attracting children to the site, with meals being offered as part of the activities (*Child Nutrition Fact Sheet*, 2005; Terry, 1980). Even with implementation of the Simplified Summer Food Program and the

Seamless Summer Food Waiver--as well as the best of intentions from the SFSP sponsors--program participation by children remains limited, at best. Therefore, it was the purpose of this study to evaluate what barriers SFSP sponsors believe hinder participation of eligible children, and additional sponsors, in the program. In addition, this study aims to identify best practices used by SFSP sponsors to improve participation in the program.

METHODOLOGY

In the initial phase of the research, a total of nine state agency directors administering the SFSP were contacted by telephone to discuss the benefits and barriers they felt exist relating to sponsor participation in the program. These state directors came from both states that did and did not participate in the Simplified Summer Food Program. They also were asked if they knew of any SFSP sponsors who might be interested in participating in the research. Eighteen sponsors were identified; however, researchers were only able to obtain responses from nine individuals. After the phone calls were completed, all responses were typed and data were reviewed and evaluated by two separate researchers to establish face and content validity. Trends in responses were totaled for each question. After receiving answers from four state directors, a pilot questionnaire was developed using Magenta 4.1, a program that creates surveys and allows responses to be "bubbled in" so that data to be scanned and directly loaded into a statistical analysis program.

The second phase of the research involved the development of a quantitative survey. If a response had been mentioned at least six times during the telephone interview, it was included on the initial questionnaire. A 5-point Likert-type scale measured agreement and importance related to the perceived barriers and benefits of participation. This questionnaire was reviewed by two research scientists for wording and appropriateness. After revisions were made, the survey was sent to four state directors that served as an expert panel. In addition to answering each question, the expert panel was given an opportunity to provide feedback on the wording and clarity of the instrument prior to distribution to SFSP sponsors. Additionally, demographic data were added to the questionnaire to evaluate the grade level primarily served, location of the program, reason for conducting a SFSP program, Simplified Summer Food Program participation, number of years as a sponsor, number of sites sponsored, number of meals served on a daily basis, and the number of weeks the program is operated. An open-ended question was developed to allow program sponsors to describe innovative techniques they had used to enhance participation at feeding sites.

Fifty pilot questionnaires were sent to SFSP sponsors in Louisiana and Oregon, states that were not included in the final survey. Ten questionnaires were returned and analyzed for validity. Due to the high Cronbach alpha scores, no changes were made to the survey questions. The final questionnaire was sent to 803 SFSP sponsors in USDA's Southeast Region. Each packet contained a cover letter and a postage-paid return envelope.

Surveys were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package, version 12.0, for Windows. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the level of agreement or importance of each question, using means, standard deviations, and frequencies. T-tests were used to evaluate differences in responses based on participation in the Simplified Summer Food Program.

Qualitative descriptions of techniques used to increase participation were summarized and examined for themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Six themes emerged from the telephone interviews with state agency directors and sponsors: 1) barriers related to a sponsor starting a program; 2) reasons a sponsor might leave or discontinue a program; 3) resources that are beneficial to a sponsor operating a program; 4) benefits to children participating in the program; 5) barriers preventing an eligible child from participating in the program; and 6) methods used to increase participation in the program. In addition, the state agency directors and sponsors listed unique techniques used by sponsors to increase participation in the SFSP.

A total of 316 surveys were returned and used in analysis, for a response rate of 39%. Responding sponsors operated the SFSP for an average of 7.4 weeks during the summer of 2005 and served an average of 905 meals per day. Respondents primarily served children in upper elementary school grades (53.9%) and most decided to participate in the program because they wanted to help meet the nutritional needs of the children (55.8%). Only 34.3% of the sponsors were operating under the Simplified Summer Feeding Food Program. Sponsors reported the average number of years they had operated a summer program was 9.9 (+8.4) and that they had overseen an average of 14.5 (+26.5) sites. All other program sponsor characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of SFSP sponsors		
Characteristic	Frequency ^a	%
Grade primarily served at feeding sites		
Upper Elementary (4-6)	144	53.9
Lower Elementary (K-3)	65	24.3
Middle School (7-8)	30	11.2
High School (9-12)	28	10.5
State in which SFSP sites are located		
Kentucky	68	22.1
Florida	57	18.5
Mississippi	44	14.3
Georgia	34	11.0
North Carolina	31	10.1
Alabama	28	9.1
Tennessee	24	7.8
South Carolina	22	7.1
Reason for participating in SFSP		
It help meet the nutritional needs of the children	169	55.8
The program was already in existence	107	35.3
Other	27	8.9
Currently operating under the Simplified Summer Food Program		
No	180	65.7
Yes	94	34.3
^a Total N varies based on responses for each question		

Means and standard deviations as well as frequencies were used to describe the level of agreement or importance for each question. Providing nutritious meals to children who would not otherwise have access to appropriate and adequate food during the summer was rated as the most important benefit of the program (4.9 + .5). These findings are encouraging in that the aim of the program is consistent with the original goal of the SFSP when it was first piloted in 1968.

Study participants indicated several barriers to operating and managing a SFSP. For the question, "How would a sponsor who has left the program rate the following reasons for not wanting to start another program in the future," respondents most strongly agreed that there is too much paperwork involved in starting a SFSP (3.7 + 1.4). Respondents also rated this reason as the primary cause for a sponsor leaving or discontinuing a program (3.7 + 1.4). Only 34% of the survey participants operated under the Simplified Summer Food Program. If more sponsors operated under this program, it may help to reduce the perceived barrier of too much paperwork associated with the SFSP.

In order to increase the number of individuals sponsoring SFSP sites, resources need to be enhanced to support them. Twenty-five years ago, Terry (1980) found that providing additional resources and training to SFSP sponsors was a key element in improving participation and enhancing management of the program. Although the majority of the participants did *not* agree that the cost of starting a program was too high (70%), more than 70% responded that "having funding prior to the start of a program" was "very important" or "extremely important." Other factors that were not deemed to carry significant weight in starting or continuing a SFSP

included "Having adequate facilities" (2.1 + 1.2) and "a sponsor with foodservice experience" (2.2 + 1.3).

Respondents identified the two most important resources for a sponsor operating a SFSP as "having adequate and appropriate staff to help with meal production" (4.5 + .8) and "access to acceptable facilities for meal preparation" (4.5 + .9). Forty-seven percent believed that training manuals and/or workshops in management and finances relating to the operation of the program would be extremely beneficial. Utilizing volunteers in the community to assist running the program, rather than having to pay staff, was not seen as important.

When asked about barriers that might affect participation by eligible children, many respondents strongly agreed that "children do not have transportation to feeding sites" (39%). Similarly, 38.9% agreed or strongly agreed that this was a reason why a sponsor might not want to start a program. It also was identified as a strong reason for leaving or discontinuing a program (63.1%).

It was agreed that "partnering with community groups, such as Boys & Girls Club of America and the YMCA to sponsor activities at the feeding sites" was one of the most beneficial ways to promote participation in the SFSP (4.1 + 1.2). Lastly, "advertising programs in areas frequented by families of eligible children" (4.5 + .8) and "having an activity associated with the program" (4.4 + .9) were seen as the most important methods to increase participation.

Although mentioned several times during the telephone interviews, 66.8% of sponsors did not agree that participation was hindered by the perceived stigma attached to receiving free meals. No significant differences in mean scores for each question were found between those sponsors that participated in the Simplified Summer Food Program and those that did not. Results related to each question are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summer Food Service Program Sponsors' Perceptions of Benefits and Barriers Related to Participation in the Program

Questions	Mean ³	SD
1. In your opinion, how would a sponsor who has left the program rate the following reasons for not wanting to start another program in the future?		
There is too much paperwork involved in starting a Sf SP	3.7	1.4
They did not understand what was involved in starting a program	3.4	1.4
They did not understand the financial component of SFSP	3.4	1.3
It takes too much time to manage a Sf SP	3.3	1.3
Transportation of children to the sites was difficult	3	1.5
There was an inadequate number of children to support the site	2.9	1.6
The cost of starting a Sf SP is too high	2.8	1.3
2. Rate the following reasons that a sponsor may give for leaving or discontinuing a program		
Too much paperwork is involved in operating a program	3.7	1.4
The overhead costs of running a program are too high	3.3	1.4
Transportation of the children to the sites was inadequate	3.1	1.4
There was an inadequate number of children to support the site	3	1.5
Community support was limited	2.7	1.3
The staff required to operate a Sf SP was inadequate/insufficient	2.7	1.3
There were too many restrictions on allowable foods	2.6	1.3
There were vendor/distribution issues	2.3	1.3
There were problems with the physical location of the site	2.3	1.2
The sponsor did not have adequate experience preparing meals	2.2	1.3
The sites were housed in inadequate facilities	2.1	1.2
3. With regards to participation, how would you rate each of the following items that might affect participation by eligible children?		
Eligible children do not have transportation to the feeding sites	3.6	1.4
Children would prefer to have hot food on a daily basis	3.1	1.4
Community members/families do not know about the program	3	1.4
Children tend to get bored with the menu	2.9	1.3
There is a perceived stigma to receiving free meals	2.8	1.4
4. Rate each of the following methods used to increase participation in the SFSP in your area		
Partnering with community groups to sponsor activities	4.1	1.2
Utilizing volunteers to teach enrichment classes	3.8	1.3
Getting local merchants to give prizes as incentives for attendance	3.6	1.4
Having a feeding site near a homeless shelter	3.4	1.3
Having food vendors/restaurants donate food	2.9	1.5
5. Rate the importance of each of the following resources that would be beneficial to a sponsor operating a Sf SP		
Having adequate/appropriate staff to help with meal production	4.5	0.8
Having an adequate facility for preparation of the meals	4.5	0.9
Having training manuals/workshops related to program operation	4.2	0.9
Having pre-established partnerships in the community	4.2	0.9
Having funding prior to the start of the program	4.1	1.2
Having a central kitchen for food production	3.8	1.3
Utilizing volunteers to run the program	3.3	1.4
6. Rate the importance of each of the following benefits of the SFSP		
Advertising the program in areas frequented by families	4.5	0.8
Having an activity associated with the program	4.4	0.9
Utilizing media to advertise the program (TV, newspapers, flyers)	4.3	1
Utilizing community groups to provide activities for the children	4.3	0.9
Having hot meals available for the children	4	1.2
³ 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree; 1=Not at All Important, 5=Extremely Important		

Of the respondents, 139 described ways they attempted to improve participation at feeding sites. Six main themes emerged as ways that sponsors used onsite activities to encourage the involvement of eligible children: 1) physical education; 2) guest speakers; 3) reading (utilizing the services of a book mobile); 4) TV and movies; 5) games, field trips, Bible classes; and 6) arts and crafts. After onsite activities, the next most common techniques used to increase participation were to advertise at grocery stores and churches; send kids home with flyers on the last day of school; put up flyers in laundromats; and print notices in the local newspaper.

Other innovative methods were suggested to improve participation. One sponsor reported feeding the parents of the children for free and did not count them as part of the program reimbursement. Another sponsor used a school bus to pick up local children at day care or from babysitters in homes. The driver of a bookmobile took packed lunches in coolers and distributed the meals to children who could not get transportation to the feeding site. Academic enrichment in reading and math was provided by another sponsor as a way to improve participation. The methods sponsors use to increase involvement are similar to recommendations made by other researchers and USDA. It appears that good advertising in communities and areas visited by families of eligible children is most often used. Because transportation of children to the feeding sites was a major issue, those suggestions that were made to help improve access to the site may, consequently, boost participation.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Three main factors limit this study. First, the survey was only given to SFSP sponsors, not to the children and/or families participating in the study. Therefore, factors affecting participation by the children listed in this study are from the point of view of the SFSP sponsor. Second, this research was limited to sponsors located in the USDA Southeast Region; therefore, results are not necessarily applicable to the whole nation. Last, there were a large number of questions included on the survey, which made it difficult to find statistical differences between those who did and did not participate in the Simplified Summer Food Program.

SFSP sponsors desire education and training in a variety of areas in order to enhance their abilities as sponsors and expand participation in the program. The Simplified Summer Food Program and the Seamless Summer Food Waiver were developed to decrease paperwork and increase participation. The first step in training would be to inform sponsors of these options, especially those individuals that operate a school nutrition program within the guidelines of the NSLP. This recommendation agrees with those of Albee et al. (2002), that the option to decrease paperwork is a way to expand the availability of SFSP. Many sponsors reported they would like start-up money prior to implementing a program in their area. Although this option is not available at this time, there are other avenues that a sponsor can explore to receive start-up funding, such as grants or other government programs. Sponsors find these resources may boost the number of sites available to children. In addition, it may encourage sponsors to operate the program throughout the entire summer.

Adequate production staff and facilities were seen as necessary resources. Sponsors may not have the time or the appropriate means to find an adequate facility for food production or to train

staff. Training is an area where state agencies may be able to assist. A suggestion given by Terry (1980) includes training site personnel on food specifications, meal preparation techniques, and nutrition education. In addition, holding weekly meetings during the summer can assist in handling problems and answering questions.

Training and manuals for the financial component of the SFSP need to be developed. Terry (1980) also suggested that sponsors be required to attend a mandatory training session where site eligibility, staffing, budgeting, and financial accountability are discussed. In addition, any topic pertaining to the management of the program should be mentioned during this mandatory meeting. Separate training sessions should be held for those sponsors that operate more non-traditional sites, such as residential camps or who provide catered meals. Additional instruction should be provided during the summer to assure compliance with all issues, thereby enhancing the quality and accountability of the SFSP.

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