



The USDA Summer Food Service Program in Coös County, New Hampshire

**Perspectives of Site Sponsors, Program Managers,
and Staff on Program Implementation and Operation**

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Introduction

When schools close in the summer, children who depend on school nutrition programs can lose access to regular meals. To help bridge this gap, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) works with state agencies to identify sponsors and meal sites to provide free lunches in the summer to eligible school-age children.

This paper reports on the results of interviews with program sponsors and site staff in four communities in Coös County, New Hampshire. Discovering how this program works on the ground and understanding the experiences of program sponsors and staff can help to inform efforts to serve eligible children.

Food Insecurity Among U.S. and NH Children

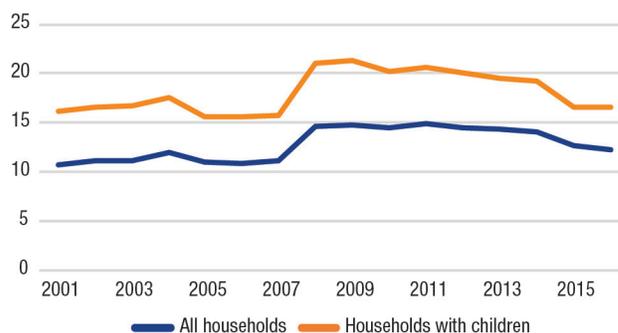
In 2016, 12.3 percent of all U.S. households and 16.5 percent of households with children were classified as food insecure, meaning that at some time during the year the household was without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food because it did not have the resources or money to pay for it. The negative consequences of food insecurity for children include poor physical health, mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety, and behavioral problems. Additionally, children from food-insecure households are more likely to be at risk for developmental concerns such as insecure attachment, deficiencies in expressive and receptive language, and difficulties with fine and gross motor skills. There is also evidence that experiencing deprivation in childhood can negatively impact individuals' mental health into adulthood, through lower educational attainment and lower quality employment experiences. As adults, their ability to be self-sufficient and provide for their own children may be hindered, thus perpetuating intergenerational food insecurity.

As seen in Figure 1, the total number of food insecure households in the United States has decreased since the highs of 2009–2011, for both all households and for households with children. Yet, while overall levels of household food insecurity have decreased, individual need among those who are still food insecure has increased. The food budget gap—the

Key Findings

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture Summer Food Service Program provides benefits to Coös County on multiple levels. For children, it ensures the availability of nutritious meals in the summer when school meal programs are not operating; for parents, it helps to alleviate pressure on food budgets; and for communities, it helps to ameliorate the impacts of poverty and lack of economic growth and development.
- Successful strategies to increase participation in summer food programs include providing bus services to transport children to sites and leveraging non-federal funding to provide meals for adults, thereby increasing the participation of children and youth.
- Sponsors in Coös County report that the requirements of summer food programs can be frustrating at times. For example, programs are not allowed to send leftover food home with children, and the paperwork can be burdensome.
- In some cases, program staff were confused or uncertain about program rules, such as procedures for handling leftover meals and snacks.

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF U.S. HOUSEHOLDS EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY, 2001–2016

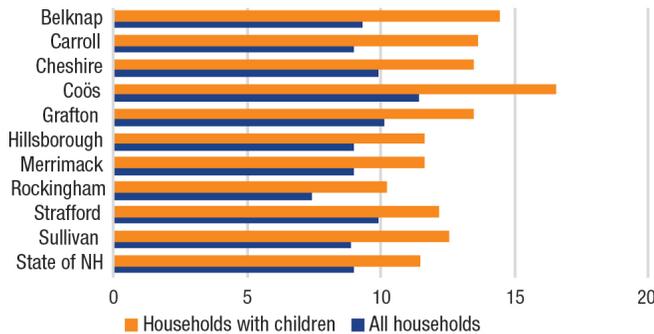


Source: USDA Economic Research Service, <https://www.ers.usda.gov>

difference between the amount of money that individuals report needing each week to meet food needs and the amount they actually have to spend—increased by 13 percent from 2008 to 2015, driven by rising household expenses and economic challenges such as unemployment and low wages. These problems are especially acute in some areas of New Hampshire as a result of mill closings and the decline in manufacturing jobs.

In 2017, Coös County had the highest annual average unemployment rate of all the counties in the state (3.4 percent compared to 2.7 percent), and the year before it had the highest overall rate of food insecurity in the state (11.4 percent) and the highest rate of child food insecurity (17.8 percent), as seen in Figure 2. Belknap County had the next highest rate of food insecurity in households with children (15.2 percent), and Grafton County had the second highest rate for all households (10.10 percent).

FIGURE 2. PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY IN NH, BY COUNTY, 2016



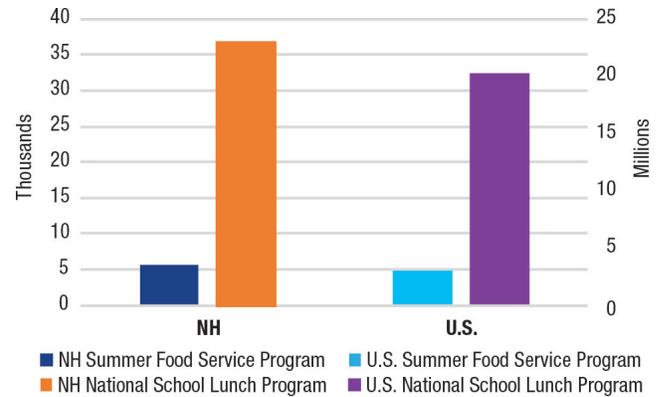
Source: Feeding America, <http://www.feedingamerica.org/research/map-the-meal-gap/2016>

USDA School Food Programs

Eligible school-age children and youth from low-income families receive free or reduced-price school lunch during the school year from the USDA National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In New Hampshire during the 2014–2015 school year, 29 percent of school-age children were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch; in Coös County, the share was 49 percent.

During the summer months, the Summer Food Service Program attempts to fill the food gap. As shown in Figure 3, vastly fewer children participate in summer food programming than participate in school lunch programs during the academic year.

FIGURE 3. AVERAGE DAILY PARTICIPATION IN USDA SCHOOL LUNCH AND SUMMER FOOD PROGRAMS, U.S. AND NH, 2016



Source: Food Research and Action Center <http://frac.org>

Data and Methods

This study examines the Summer Food Service Program operating in 2017 in four communities in Coös County, New Hampshire, the northernmost, largest, and most sparsely populated county in the state. The communities, selected to reflect different degrees of population density and different areas of the county, include Berlin, the only city in the county and hence a more densely populated area; the town of Lancaster, which is the county seat; and the towns of North Stratford and Groveton, which are mostly rural. Information provided by the State of New Hampshire regarding the distribution of types of sites and sponsors, as well as publicly available data, provided context and background for interviews and observations.

The sites visited included a mix of open and enrolled sites, as there were no summer camp sites operating in Coös County in 2017 (see Box 1 for definitions of open, enrolled, and summer camp sites). A total of nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two site sponsors, seven site managers and staff, and one food service provider. Interviews were transcribed and coded for recurring themes.

Sponsors

Schools, local government agencies, camps, and faith-based and other nonprofit community organizations can apply to be summer meal sponsors and sites under the Summer Food Service Program. Sponsors receive reimbursement for their expenses from the USDA through the state, and sponsors in areas designated as rural by the USDA are eligible for reimbursement at a slightly higher rate than sponsors at non-rural sites to account for the additional cost of operating in rural locales. For example, rural sites are reimbursed \$3.83 for each lunch served, compared to \$3.77 for non-rural sites. The rural designation applies to all of Coös County.

There were twenty-seven sponsors in New Hampshire in 2017, compared with twenty-five in 2016 and twenty-four in 2015. New Hampshire sponsors include community action programs, school districts, boys and girls clubs, Head Start programs, recreation departments, and food banks. In Berlin, the long-time program sponsor is the City of Berlin Recreation and Parks Department, which currently hosts six sites at schools and playground locations. Berlin's summer food program dates back to the 1990s, when the paper mill was closing down. The program manager at the Recreation and Parks Department explained:

Providing the USDA Summer Meals started back around the Brown Company mill's first closing, sometime in the 1990s, I believe. We just find that it's a need. There's never a doubt that we qualify, as long as the public school system has 50 percent free and reduced-price school meals. It's the average they count, and some schools have had up to 63 percent of kids getting it.

The sponsor in the three other locations—Lancaster, North Stratford, and Groveton—is the New Hampshire Food Bank, a statewide hunger relief organization that supplies food to food pantries, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, children's programs, and senior centers. The Food Bank became involved with the SFSP more recently, as recounted by its program manager:

Undersecretary of Agriculture Kevin Concannon visited the New Hampshire Food Bank and its kitchen in 2012 and implored us to become a sponsor. We were already a vendor for the Manchester Boys and Girls Club at the time. We quickly got a program running that summer with two sites.

Box 1: Types of Summer Food Service Program Meal Sites

Summer Food Service Program meal sites are designated as either open sites, enrolled sites, or summer camps. **Open sites** are situated in areas where at least half of the school-age children are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals, and the meals that are served in the SFSP are free to all children without any application requirements or income verification. **Enrolled sites** provide free meals to children enrolled in a particular program at the food site, for example, a summer school program at a school where at least half of the enrolled children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. **Summer camps** can receive reimbursement for meals served to children who qualify for free and reduced-price meals.

In 2017, the New Hampshire Food Bank sponsored ten sites, including six in Coös County and four in the Claremont area of Sullivan County.

Types of SFSP Meals Offered

In New Hampshire in the summer of 2017, there were 183 SFSP sites, a 14 percent increase over 2015. These included ninety-eight open sites, seventy-six enrolled sites, and nine summer camps. Program attendance varies across sites: many playground sites are set up for children to drop in as they choose, while most enrolled sites serve approximately the same students every day in more structured programs.

As shown in Table 1, in the summer of 2017, Berlin hosted four open sites and two enrolled sites, while Lancaster, Groveton, and North Stratford each offered open sites, all sponsored by the New Hampshire Food

TABLE 1. TYPES OF SUMMER FOOD PROGRAM SITES IN THE FOUR COÖS COUNTY STUDY COMMUNITIES

Community	Type of site	Location	Program Length (Weeks)
Berlin	Open (4 sites)	Playground/Rec Center	4.5
Berlin	Enrolled (2 sites)	Schools	5.5
North Stratford	Open	School	7
Groveton	Open	School	9
Lancaster	Open	Recreation Center	10

Source: Data provided by New Hampshire Department of Education

Bank. Sites vary in the length of time during which the SFSP operates. The Lancaster program operates for the longest duration, while the Berlin playground sites are in operation for the shortest.

The Berlin sites offer children both lunch and snacks, while the New Hampshire Food Bank sites in North Stratford, Groveton, and Lancaster offer lunch only. Both program sponsors access additional, non-USDA funds to provide food. Berlin enjoys support from the Salvation Army for breakfast items like cereal, while the New Hampshire Food Bank raises private funds to provide fresh items and to accommodate the meal pattern required by USDA. The additional private funding also helps the Food Bank offset its costs for delivering meals.

Distribution and Logistics

Berlin contracts for lunches and snacks with the Senior Meals Program, which is part of the Coös, Carroll, and Grafton Tri-County Community Action Program. The playground and school-based meal sites call in the daily count of lunches to the Recreation and Parks Department, which coordinates the pick-up and delivery of meals to the sites. Each morning, staff load six to eight large, empty, wheeled coolers into the recreation department van, which was donated by the city, and drive to the Senior Meals Program to pick up the prepared lunches and snacks. After delivering to playground sites, the van returns to the main recreation building and offloads the remaining filled coolers. Some of the food will be consumed onsite by the children attending the recreation program there, and some will be picked up by the school-based-program staff, who come with their own coolers and take the number of meals they have preordered.

In Lancaster and Groveton, the New Hampshire Food Bank hires staff to operate the summer food program, using the facilities of the White Mountain Regional High School Culinary Arts Program. The meals are prepared in the high school kitchen and delivered to the recreation program in Lancaster and to the school program at Groveton High School. The Lancaster site manager explained how this arrangement works:

I think the fact that they've worked it out so well that the meals are delivered so we don't have to hire somebody to go get them, and they are very flexible as far as that. So I mean you couldn't ask for an easier set up for us. All we have to do is call with the

count, and the high school delivers the meals to us. A couple weeks ago we took the kids on a field trip up Mt. Prospect, and they had taken the lunches up the mountain and had them waiting for the kids.

In North Stratford, the Food Bank contracts with the school food service program directly. Meals are prepared onsite at the Stratford Public School kitchen, which also prepares lunches for the nearby Stewartstown Community School program. The Stratford school principal said of this program:

Having our own cook right there onsite to do these meals is definitely a positive for us, so it's been a good thing. She is familiar with everything, and does a good job.

Program Promotion

Awareness of the Summer Food Service Program is key to providing children with nutritious food, and communities promote the program in several ways. All interviewees said that flyers are sent home with students as the end of the school year approaches, and advertising is placed in local newspapers and other media. The open sites are often affiliated with or located in close proximity to summer recreation programs, which get the word out as well. In Groveton, the New Hampshire Food Bank leveraged other sources of funding to create and promote a food program for parents and other adults as well, and this program attracted more children to the SFSP meals. As she stated:

It seemed to work to attract more children, and in one case the grandfather brought the children in and three generations from one family were getting a noon meal.

Perceptions of Program Benefits

Interviewees cited the benefits of the SFSP at the child, family, and community level.

Generally, site managers and sponsors feel that the program works well at the child level, by reaching children who might otherwise have little food to eat in the summer. The Groveton site manager described how important the program is for disadvantaged children:

They get a good lunch, because you don't know what else they will have to eat for the rest of the day. There's a fresh fruit and a vegetable every day,

and some of these kids haven't seen this stuff before. They know what a strawberry is, but they have never had their own at home.

An added benefit for children at the Groveton site is the continued presence of support and mentoring staff whom the students work with during the school year, as the staff also attend the summer lunch meals.

The site manager at an enrolled site in Berlin shared her experience of personal involvement at mealtime:

This is a major need for our children. In the past, before we had this available to us, I used to personally pack three or four extra lunches in my bag every single day because inevitably you always have a student who forgot their lunch. In some cases it was forgotten but in most cases they just didn't have it at home or their parents don't have time to go to the store to get something, or whatever the case might have been. So there were times that I gave my own lunch away and I quickly learned that was a bad idea because I'm not taking care of myself. I'll personally pack extra foods to make sure that the students are getting their needs met, so this program has been a huge relief.

At the family level, interviewees report that having lunch provided for children in the summer makes a huge difference for families and their food budgets. The North Stratford site manager said:

This program works very well, I think it's a great asset for us. With this program coming in it's just very nice. Just let us know what it is you're going to allow us to do and we will work within those guidelines. Most of our students are free and reduced lunch anyway, so you know they're coming in hungry. I'm sure that's a big benefit for the families because you've got a great big lunch at, you know, noon that tides them over because who knows what's happening at night.

A Berlin site manager made a similar observation about families in her area:

I think that this might be a financial relief for them where they know that their children are going to be provided food at this program and that's one less expense they have to worry about for the family budget. So I think it's very huge impact on the clientele that we serve.

An additional benefit for parents is not having to fill out paperwork or provide proof of income to qualify for the SFSP, since in school districts where 50 percent or more of children enrolled receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year, the community is automatically eligible for free lunches without an income-based qualifying test. This rule facilitates participation by eligible children and helps to lessen the economic burden on parents, as pointed out by the Lancaster site manager:

I like the fact that our parents don't have to fill out paperwork, because if they did, unfortunately, you and I both know that some parents are too proud, you know. They don't want people knowing their business and I don't want to know how much people make and so I think we have a greater participation rate because of that.

At the community level, a common theme emerged related to the larger challenges of poverty and the lack of economic growth and development in the area, particularly since the mill closures. Program staff are concerned about children going hungry in the summer, and are grateful that they are able to reach at least some of them. The program site manager in Lancaster said:

It is such a value to our community and I know in Groveton and Whitefield and the surrounding towns there are a lot more hurting families.

The site manager in Groveton talked about the changing nature of the community and about supporting children in several ways under the SFSP. In addition to being able to feed hungry children, program staff can offer other resources that children might not have access to in the summer.

People moved out after the mill closures, and now we have a much more transient population, with more drug issues, and fewer resources. This program helps. We have the school drug officer come in to lunch during the summer to keep that connection there for the kids, so they have someone consistent and who can talk about their concerns, since a lot of parents have drug problems.

A Berlin sponsor noted that hiring students to work in the program provides an additional community-level benefit:

[For] all the 16-, 17-, and even sometimes 15-year-olds, it may be the first job, or it may be their first exposure to children that come from a different background than they do and they get to see it for maybe for the first time and then really get to realize how fortunate they may be. They might think “I love doing this, I’m going to go into the education field or the sports medicine field.” We can give them their first taste of working with children, the first case of simply being responsible, being on time, and all that.

Challenges and Strategies

Compared to more economically concentrated areas, rural areas face greater challenges from poverty, population dispersion, high unemployment, food insecurity, and lack of access to services such as public transportation. These factors both increase the need for summer meal programs and create barriers to their successful implementation and student participation. In recent studies, Summer Food Service Program state administrators and site sponsors in rural areas have cited lack of transportation, lack of sponsors for meal sites, and lack of knowledge in the community about available programs as barriers to SFSP utilization for families. Interviewees in Coös County echoed these concerns.

In discussing transportation, the New Hampshire Food Bank sponsor of the Western Coös County sites said:

It depends on the location. In some cases the challenge is the delivery of meals to remote rural sites. In other cases it is finding labor to prepare and deliver the meals. In Coös County I think the biggest issue is transportation.

She also said that “...the Groveton site’s strategy of offering meals for adults really helps with the transportation issue for children,” since the adults will provide a means for the family to get to the site.

North Stratford manages the transportation issue with a bus that transports children from around the area to the summer program provided at the school. The site coordinator spoke about the benefit of this option:

What I’ve experienced this year in adding Colebrook to our summer school program is that we’ve had kids that utilize... like say they’re from Groveton and they go to Colebrook for the night, they’ll jump on the bus and come to school like

they’re using the bus as an actual bus system. We’ve got kids that go down to Groveton, you know, for the night, and they’ll pick up the bus in the morning and drive up to school so it’s almost like teaching a life skill too, because we’ve got three different bus times, three different pickups, three different drop offs in Colebrook, in Groveton, and then the Stratford students don’t really have to worry at all.

Programmatic Complexities

For sponsors and site staff alike, the paperwork that must be completed for the SFSP and the specific processes and guidelines that must be followed can be a barrier to their participation in the program, although the degree of concern expressed by interviewees varied. The two sponsors interviewed both mentioned this:

This program is very labor intensive from an administrative perspective and there are many challenges to providing this service in rural areas.

The paperwork and the amount of time...I wish Berlin could just afford it. All the paperwork for the playground leaders, we have to do it for all of the sites. I have to do the whole thing for each of them and seems like it’s a lot of time wasted.

The site manager in Lancaster referred to the initial logistical challenges in getting the program up and running:

Actually, I would say the whole system in the beginning was a little bumpy, because it was brand new to everybody and so we were all kind of learning our way through, and like for example, getting the meals here on time, and that kind of thing. But this year there have been no glitches at all, even the first day, because you know the first day’s a little rough so we kind of expect that that very first day it’s going to be late [lunch delivery] and we plan accordingly. But this year even that didn’t happen.

Site supervisors also report that the amount of food in the lunches does not always seem sufficient, especially for older youth. A site manager in Berlin discussed the quantity of food in the lunches:

Like it’s not going to fill up a 12-year-old boy, so yes, we are allowed to give them a second meal and even on the meal count sheets there’s a spot for us to

indicate how many of the second meals we give out so that is very good and I like that part. I just wish that we were able to, if we had some extra meals, send them home where we know they're going to get used instead of the rule being they have to be eaten here, that would be my wish.

USDA program rules address factors such as the composition and nutritional requirements for lunches, the handling of leftover lunches, and the accounting for all meals and snacks. For site supervisors and other program staff, these rules can be a little confusing, and sometimes there are misunderstandings. The Lancaster site manager reported that compliance with these rules can be frustrating:

It's hard not being able to send home any leftovers, since we know kids don't have food at home. Even if we have, say, five turkey wraps left over, and we could just send those home with the kids that would be great.

Program rules also make it challenging for sponsors to reach eligible children, particularly in a rural state like New Hampshire. Two USDA-sponsored demonstration projects in several states tested different approaches to improving the effectiveness and reach of summer food programs for children. The first was the Enhanced Summer Food Service Program (eSFSP), which tested modifications to the existing SFSP including home delivery of summer meals to children in rural areas, food backpacks for children for days when SFSP sites were not operating, grants to SFSP providers to enhance activities at sites to increase attendance, and increased financial incentives to sponsors to encourage programs to run for longer than eight weeks. The second was the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) program, which provided families benefit cards to purchase food for children in the summer when school meals were not available. This program would be a viable option for families in rural areas that are not served by congregate summer food sites and would mitigate the need for transportation to meal sites. While these strategies showed promising results, not all states have received waivers to allow their implementation. The New Hampshire Food Bank sponsor discussed this challenge:

The congregate site model is a problem in many areas. In some areas of New Hampshire, non-USDA eligible sites are running privately funded grocery delivery programs where families receive a bag of lunch groceries

for each child in the household. The USDA does not allow for offsite meals or meal delivery in New Hampshire and the added SNAP EBT [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Electronic Benefits Transfer] benefits are only available in some pilot areas around the country. New Hampshire is not eligible to participate. I would like to see USDA Food and Nutrition Service provide some additional waivers for these areas. Many children do not have access to summer programming, and the delivered groceries programs in the state seem to be well received by families as an alternative to the congregate meals.

Conclusion

The findings from this small, exploratory study suggest that sponsors and site managers generally view the Summer Food Service Program positively, but they experience difficulties around the everyday implementation of the program and face administrative hurdles to reaching more children. The paperwork burden can be time consuming for the sponsors, and the lack of flexibility in program rules can be frustrating. While there are myriad manuals and tool kits to help implement and run the programs, in some cases the information is not clearly understood by those who are involved day to day.

Modifications of the existing program, designed to increase program participation, were developed and tested under the two Summer Food for Children Demonstration programs: the Enhanced Summer Food Service Program, and the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children project. While instituting either of these strategies would require approval from both the state and the USDA, the need for them in Coös County and the utility of some of these approaches were cited by the sponsor of six food sites in the area. Additionally, as seen above, some of the summer food programs operate for fewer than five weeks, and extending them with financial incentives would benefit children.

Across the Coös County sites visited for this study there is much disadvantage, but there are also many people who are dedicated to the health and wellbeing of the children and committed to ensuring that children receive adequate nutrition through innovative strategies to make the SFSP work as well as it can. Expanding and funding more summer food sites and exploring and implementing other innovative strategies to provide food to children in the summer is vital in order to ensure that children grow and thrive.

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