

Books and Bites

How Libraries Can Help to Reduce Child Hunger During the Summer



In Massachusetts, over 200,000 youth live in food insecure homes. Hunger impacts a child's ability to thrive academically and puts them at risk for adverse health outcomes. Low-income families rely on healthy school meals to bridge gaps in their food budgets, where can they turn when school is out? The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federally-funded nutrition program that provides free meals to youth ages 18 and under. With your help, we can reduce child hunger in the summer months.

LIBRARIES AND SFSP: A WINNING PARTNERSHIP TO ADDRESS SUMMER HUNGER AND LEARNING LOSS

Increasingly, libraries are adding to their traditional role as centers of knowledge by becoming community-centered institutions and providing expanded services to their surrounding neighborhoods and municipalities. By serving summer meals, libraries can help to combat hunger among children and teens in their communities.

Libraries are an ideal venue for expanding summer meals in eligible communities. As trusted institutions that are often centrally-located, libraries are a place many turn to for books, digital media, internet access, and community programming. Many libraries also provide youth programming where a summer meal can be incorporated.

“Without summer meals, we couldn't have summer programming.” - Cate Merlin, Teen Librarian at Peabody Institute Library

Offering summer meals also helps libraries to achieve their mission to foster learning by addressing the interconnected challenges of summer hunger and learning loss. Children who are behind during the school year can fall even further behind in the absence of summer enrichment programming. Reading programs, STEM camps, and other summer enrichment programs offered by libraries can help counteract learning loss – especially when provided in combination with a healthy meal.

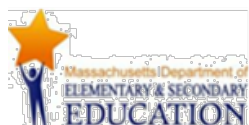
SUCCESS STORY: PEABODY INSTITUTE LIBRARY

The Peabody Institute Library (PIL) has been a summer meals site since 2009. The meal takes place in the library's courtyard abutting a main street, under a tent. The teen room offers a refuge in case of bad weather. While the physical space is an advantage, the real magic at PIL comes from their dynamic programming for teens.



SFSP participants using a 3D printer at Peabody Institute Library

Innovative partnerships can also be fostered by providing meals as part of library summer enrichment programs. Through its partnership with Peabody Recreation Department, PIL launched “Rebound and Read”, a program for middle schoolers that combines reading, a nutritious meal, and a game of basketball. Shared objectives that promote learning alongside healthy eating and physical activity help students to understand the connections between nourishing their bodies and their minds.





Books and Bites

How Libraries Can Help to Reduce Child Hunger During the Summer

SITES & SPONSORS

Libraries can help to provide summer meals to the youth in the communities they serve by becoming a “site”. Sites function as the physical location in which meals are distributed. Sites work alongside a “sponsor” which produces or procures the meals in accordance with USDA guidelines, delivers meals to the site, and provides administrative support by completing paperwork and handling meal reimbursements.

No kitchen, no problem! Sites are not responsible for meal preparation, so having a kitchen is not required. CNOP and your sponsor can help troubleshoot meal storage.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Programming: Libraries can have a successful summer meal site without concurrent enrichment programming. However, combining the two helps to drive participation rates and contributes to the success of both services.

Teen Programming: Teens can be a particularly challenging group to engage – especially in summertime. Libraries have an advantage in appealing to teens by offering free resources and sometimes even summer employment opportunities. Libraries have a wealth of resources to help reduce summer learning loss for teens, preparing them for the next school year or for college.

Eating Outside: Serving meals outdoors in a welcoming public-facing space helps to draw in additional youth participants and ensures that families in the community are aware that free meals are available nearby. Outdoor meal service also helps to maintain libraries’ existing food and beverage policies. Building a community presence outside the walls of the library promotes your commitment to offering a broad range of community benefits.

Staffing Matters: Partnering with a sponsor can help to reduce staffing burdens, but it is vital to have dedicated library staff or volunteers on-site to welcome children, document the number of meals distributed, and ensure the program’s success. When staffing is a challenge, local partners can assist in providing additional support. As part of the technical assistance that CNOP provides, we help libraries to develop innovative local partnerships and developing staffing structures that work whatever your capacity.

Interns & Volunteers: Engaging teens and young adults to help with the logistics of setting up a summer meal site, outreach, or conducting complementary programming can be a tool to bridge staffing gaps when resources are limited. Bringing young people aboard to help promote the availability of free meals to their peers and younger youth helps to reduce the stigma that is sometimes associated with the program – plus interns under 18 can receive a free meal themselves!



A tent set up for SFSP in the PIL courtyard

NEXT STEPS: STARTING AN SFSP LIBRARY SITE!

Contact the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Child Nutrition Outreach Program at Project Bread at CNOP@projectbread.org to find out if your library is eligible to provide free summer meals to children and teens or visit us online at www.meals4kids.org.

