

Summer Meals & Health Centers



How Health Centers 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.

COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS AND SFSP: A WINNING PARTNERSHIP TO ADDRESS SUMMER HUNGER

Community health centers (CHCs) provide primary and preventive care in medically-underserved communities. Many of these communities are also considered food deserts or areas of high food insecurity. According to the Bureau of Primary Health Care, health centers provide healthcare services to 1 out of 10 children in the United States, making them a natural partner for serving free meals to children during the summer.

Who uses health centers?

- Over 7 million are children
- 92% have family incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line

In addition to primary care, health centers often provide many wraparound services including dental, vision, nutrition counseling, and access to support services. Providing SFSP meals to pediatric patients and other children in the surrounding neighborhood is an opportunity to further extend these services and improve health outcomes among both patients and the community at-large.

As trusted institutions that are often centrally-located, community health centers are a place many turn to for social services. Serving SFSP meals can also serve as an outreach tool for CHCs to reach prospective patients and families who may not be aware of the services provided.

SUCCESS STORY: CHARLES RIVER COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

The Charles River Community Health Center is located between two major roads and is adjacent to a park. The summer meal is served in a community meeting room located at the ground floor adjacent to the parking lot. Two members of health center's Health & Outreach team walk through the building each day before the site opens ensuring patients and families know about the meal. Medical staff screen pediatric patients for food insecurity and are able to provide a referral to the free meal just outside as well as to other meal sites available in the surrounding community.



Charles River Community Health Center

In this first year, the site was staffed by the Greater Boston YMCA for just 30 minutes each day, but in the future a volunteer will be able to staff the site longer as well as move the meal outside to the area adjacent to the community room. This will increase visibility to and participation from the surrounding community.



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SITES & SPONSORS

Community health centers can help to provide summer meals to the youth in their community 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

Communications: Although a community health center is a trusted source for nutrition information, serving a meal at a CHC is likely a new idea for your community. Working with community partners to send fliers home at schools or canvass the nearby community can help get the word out. A banner outside a clinic helps to further promote the availability of the program to all in the community who qualify. Exam and waiting rooms provide an opportunity to provide meal information to patients through fliers and brochures. The most effective outreach is often word-of-mouth, whether from a trusted community champion, a CHC staff member, or directly from a provider.

Programming: CHCs can take advantage of existing on-site programming like wellness classes, pediatric group medical appointments, farmers markets, and food pantries to draw more youth to the site to enjoy a meal. Consider offering meals at times that coincide with events and programs to maximize participation.

Staffing Matters: Partnering with a sponsor can help to reduce staffing burdens, but it is vital to have dedicated staff, interns, 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 can help a health center develop innovative local partnerships and staffing structures that work, whatever your capacity.

Choosing a location: Finding the perfect location within your clinic may be a challenge, especially at busy times when waiting areas may be full. Serving meals outdoors helps to draw in additional youth participants and ensures that families in the community are aware that free meals are available nearby. Additionally, building a community presence outside the walls of the office provides an outreach opportunity for families not yet access CHC services. While serving meals outdoors is often the “gold standard” for SFSP sites, indoor spaces are also feasible – especially when combined with inviting signage.



NEXT STEPS: STARTING AN SFSP 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 office is eligible to provide free summer meals to children and teens or visit us online at www.meals4kids.org.

