

USDA Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Integrity Study (Summary)

Background

To combat food insecurity during the summer months, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides nutritious meals to children in low-income areas when school is not in session.

There are three common SFSP site types: open sites, closed enrolled sites, and camps. Open sites make meals available to all children in the area on a first come, first served basis and are located in areas where at least 50 percent of children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. Closed enrolled sites provide free meals to children enrolled in an activity program at the site where at least half of them are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Camps receive reimbursement only for meals served to enrolled children who qualify for free and reduced-price meals.

The SFSP Integrity study was designed to improve understanding of how State agencies provide oversight of the SFSP. To address the research objectives, the study examined such areas as sponsor and site selection, training and technical assistance, meal counting and claiming, and reviews. The findings also offered some preliminary responses about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SFSP operations.

Key Findings

- States reported greater challenges identifying sponsors in rural areas than urban or suburban areas.
- States cited financial management and administrative capacity as the best indicators of whether new sponsors will be successful. Most States believed pre-approval visits effectively identified potential problems.
- There were few patterns among sponsors and States regarding the most common causes of meal counting or claiming errors.
- Waivers of area eligibility and congregate feeding requirements issued during the COVID-19 pandemic reduced administrative burden for sponsors, sites, and households.

Methods

The study involved a four-part sequential data collection effort:

1. An online survey of all State agencies that administer the SFSP (50 U.S. States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands);
2. In-depth telephone interviews with 18 State Child Nutrition directors;
3. In-depth telephone interviews with 48 SFSP sponsors operating within the interviewed States; and
4. In-depth telephone interviews with 48 SFSP sites overseen by the sponsors interviewed.

Data were collected between January and August 2021, and respondents were asked to reference typical SFSP operations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic when responding to questions. Some questions also referenced perceptions of operational changes, challenges, and opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

States were more likely to report significant challenges in identifying capable sponsors in rural areas than in urban and suburban areas. About 41 percent of States indicated identifying sponsors in rural areas was a moderate or significant challenge, compared to 29 percent in urban or suburban areas. This was due to the smaller pool of qualified organizations operating in rural areas.

When asked to identify what factors are the best indicators of whether new sponsors can be successful, interviewed State directors cited financial management and administrative capacity, including a sponsor's staffing. As part of the application review, States request and review a comprehensive list of documentation from sponsor applicants, such as financial records, proof of nonprofit status, site information, menu plans, business licenses, and operational schedules.

In interviews, the majority of State directors (12 of 18) believed the pre-approval visits were effective in spotting potential problems. If an organization satisfies the eligibility requirements, staff will schedule an in-person pre-approval visit to the sponsor and their sites. While State directors reported sometimes denying new sponsor applications, denials were uncommon. When a denial did occur, the two most common reasons for the denial were because the organization did not meet the eligibility criteria or was determined not to be financially viable. Although USDA waived the requirement to conduct pre-approval visits during the pandemic, most State directors (14 of 18) said their staff continued conducting these visits, conducting them remotely rather than in person.

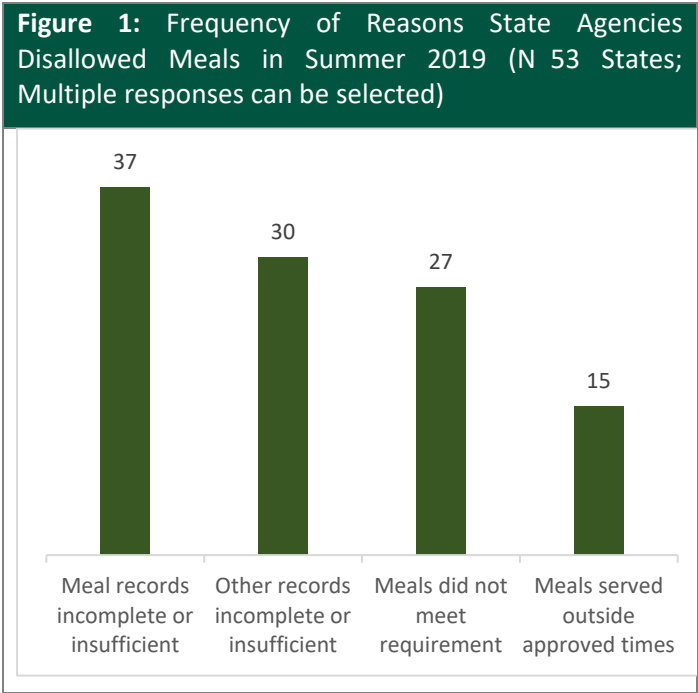
Sponsors look at a variety of factors when deciding to bring a new site on board. The most common factor that sponsors took into account before deciding to partner with a new site was their assessment of the need for SFSP at the potential location, based on poverty level and population density.

About 20 percent of interviewed sponsors (10 of 48) reported that there usually were no problems with accuracy of meal count data. When there were issues, few patterns emerged regarding the causes. Some sponsors pointed to one or more human errors, such as no signature on the form, incorrect calculations, or the meal count form was filled out incorrectly. When violations occurred, sponsors provide training on the issue to prevent mistakes from being repeated.

State survey findings indicate that an average of about 6 percent of sites had meals disallowed in 2019, but there was little agreement on the cause of errors. The most commonly cited violations were: (1) incomplete or insufficient records (meal count records, menus, meal receipts); (2) observed meals not meeting meal pattern requirements; and (3) meals served outside of approved times (Figure 1). During administrative reviews of sponsors and their sites, State reviewers accompany sponsors to inspect food preparation facilities (including vendors’ facilities), observe meal distribution, tally the number of reimbursable meals served, and review files such as temperature logs and production records.

Sponsors and sites noted specific requirements they wanted relaxed in order to better administer the program and respond to participants’ needs. The congregate feeding requirement, which requires children to consume their meals on-site, was the most cited requirement that sponsors and sites would change. Some sponsors wanted to lower the area eligibility threshold as they felt the 50 percent eligible for free or reduced-price school meals was too high. Some sites wanted to amend the milk requirement because milk was often wasted, and one site suggested a more general dairy requirement instead.

According to State directors, sponsors and sites, waivers issued during the pandemic allowed them to continue to operate and reduced administrative burden. In addition to allowing children to walk into a SFSP site and pick up a bagged meal to consume off-site (“grab-and-go”), waivers allowed parents or guardians to pick up meals on behalf of their eligible children, which was previously not allowed. Another example noted was that the area eligibility waiver reduced administrative burden on both sponsors and households by eliminating the need to collect and review household income applications at closed sites and extended the reach of the SFSP.



For More Information:
Giesen, L., Gola, A.A, Gearing, M., Gabay, M., Baier, K., Bozzolo, C., and Mwombela, B. (2023). Summer Food Service Program Integrity Study Final Report. Prepared by Westat, Contract No. 12319818A0021; Order No. 12319818F0134 . Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Chan Chanhatsilpa. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.