

Better Summer Food Services Should Be a Priority

The greatest shortfall in the child nutrition programs is the lack of assistance for low-income children during the summer. Nationally, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) serves about one in ten

and would provide services have opted out of the program due to stringent administrative requirements.

The SFSP was launched in 1968 to address the lack of nutrition services once school was out for the summer.

their communities, not adopting policies that discourage providers from meeting the needs of children.

Expanding the reach of the SFSP is critical because during the summer many low-income children have no other resources available to obtain nutritious meals. School is out and so is children's access to the meals served there. Parents working low-wage jobs have a hard enough time putting food on the table when their children are getting school meals. Since hunger does not go on vacation for the summer, there is a pressing need for government to provide low-income children with federally subsidized meals when school is out.

A pilot program proposed by Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) in 2000, the Simplified Summer Food Service Program (SSFSP), was an important step in the right direction. From 2001 to 2004, 13 states and Puerto Rico participated in the pilot. The SSFSP allowed public institutions (schools, for example) to apply for reimbursements to cover their combined operating and administrative costs, thereby simplifying the paperwork and eliminating some of the administrative burden mentioned above. Additionally, any public institution in an area where 50 percent or more of the families lived at or below 185 percent of the poverty level could provide free meals to all children




children who qualify for the free or reduced-price school meals. The SFSP, even though it is an entitlement program, is not reaching the many millions of children it is supposed to serve.

Entitlement means that any child who qualifies should be able to receive meals—but it is a moot point if there is no one willing to provide them, and that is precisely the problem in far too many communities. Some organizations that could

Over the years, sponsoring organizations have included schools, parks, playgrounds, recreation centers, housing projects, migrant centers, Indian reservations, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, houses of worship, summer camps and other sites.

In 1996, Congress reduced SFSP reimbursement rates, making it more difficult for sponsors to cover their costs. We believe government should be encouraging organizations to start summer food programs in



without collecting eligibility information.

During the first four years of the pilot, participation in the SFSP increased by 25.2 percent in the 13 eligible states. During the same period, participation across the rest of the country declined by 8.6 percent.

The pilot had another noteworthy effect. The number of sponsors operating summer programs in the 13 pilot states increased by 20.8 percent, and the number of sites offering meals increased by 54.8 percent.

Due to the success of the pilot, Congress used the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act to add six more states for a total of 19. As of January 2005, all summer food providers in these states, including non-profits, are allowed to

participate in the SSFSP.


In order to improve the SFSP, the government will have to work with more non-profits. Non-profit organizations have always played a major role in connecting people in their communities with government services. Non-profits hold the key to rapidly expanding the SSFP, either by starting programs or advocating for additional policy changes in the next reauthorization.

The simplified program is a big improvement over the 1996 legislation, but alone it cannot reach all the children eligible for summer meals. Other aspects of the program require still more creative thinking. For instance, participation in rural areas is complicated by greater distances for the children to travel, and less

transportation available to program sites. Rural transportation grants will be awarded starting in 2006.

It is important for everyone concerned with boosting the nation's child nutrition programs to continue pressing for enhancements in the SFSP. Expanding the current pilot to all the states is an excellent place to start.

"My hope is that we will continually work towards providing an effective nutrition safety net for our nation's children," said Senator Lugar when he proposed the SSFSP in 2000. "It is clear that the need to feed youths in the summer time is a nationwide problem, and I hope that my Senate colleagues will move quickly to address this shortfall."



Case Study in Nutrition Assistance

A Summer Feeding Program in Kansas

Karole Bradford

Andrew was 7 years old when he started coming to the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) at Fairmount United Church of Christ in 2002. He and his brothers were spending their days roaming the neighborhood and roughhousing in the park. Gangs and drugs were a threat to the area.

Andrew's mother worked most days, so the boys were on their own from 7:00 in the morning until about 6:00 at night.

Andrew is the face of the SFSP. He lives below the poverty level in a single-parent working household. His mother's salary is just slightly above minimum wage.

Andrew and his brothers could not count on food being in the house. In fact they never ate breakfast, and dinner was hit-or-miss. The SFSP was their only reliable source of food. It was also a dependable source of friendship, community, structure and exercise.

Andrew and his brothers were always the first to arrive for lunch, sometimes showing up as early as an hour and a half before the meal was served, and they were always the last to leave. They never missed a day.

Andrew has a long, hard row to hoe as he grows up, but he has a better chance for healthy develop-

ment and a good life with the support of programs like the SFSP.

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