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NJ makes progress on summer meals for kids *State seeking 2017 Summer Meals Providers*

By Nancy Parello

Last summer, more New Jersey children received meals during the summer – a time when many children face hunger because they do not have access to school meals.

According to data from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, New Jersey communities fed nearly 84,000 children on an average day in July 2016 through various federal summer meals programs. That means an average of about 4,700 more children received a summer meal each July day, translating to 6 percent increase over 2015.

In addition, the number of sites where children living in low-income communities could receive a meal increased 21 percent from 1,113 in 2015 to 1,351 in 2016, according to state data.

This progress was fueled, to a large extent, by a concerted effort by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture and the New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign to recruit more summer meal sponsors and sites.

New Jersey's participation rate inched up to nearly 21 percent, from 18.5 percent in July 2015. This is as a percent of the 403,000 children who received free or low-cost school lunch during the academic year.

While this is good progress, the national Food Research Action Center recommends that communities reach 40 percent of low-income children who eat lunch at school.

Since communities are reimbursed based on the number of meals served, New Jersey could collect an estimated \$5.7 million dollars each year to feed hungry children during the summer months. (These preliminary statistics may be subject to change).



Help combat childhood hunger in your community this summer!

It's not too late to offer summer meals to children in your community. To find out how, contact the New Jersey Department of Agriculture at 609-292-4498 or by emailing SFSPCommunication@ag.state.nj.us.



To learn more about summer meals, visit njsummermeals.org.

Summer is often the hungriest time of year for children who rely on school meals for adequate nutrition. Summer also stretches family budgets with additional child care costs. Many food banks report that more families turn to them for food in the summer months to replace the meals provided by schools.

Giving Every Child A Chance

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In addition to providing free, healthy meals, these programs also offer an opportunity for children 18 years and younger to play together, engage in enrichment activities, hone their academic skills and be better prepared when they return to school in September.

Combating Summertime Hunger

To fight summer hunger, the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service provides funding to local governments, school districts and community organizations to serve summer meals to children.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture, which administers the summer meals programs at the state level, is currently recruiting additional sponsors and sites to participate in these programs.

The USDA funds three summer meals programs, which typically run during July and August, although some begin serving meals at the end of June, as soon as school lets out.

At most sites that are open to the public, parents do not need to fill out an application nor provide identification for their children to receive meals, according to federal rules. The meals must meet federal nutrition standards. The USDA recommends low-fat, low-sugar and whole-grain foods.

Summertime Meals Programs Available

Through the Summer Food Service Program, the USDA funds organizations to "sponsor" a summer meals program. Sponsors can be school districts, municipal entities, such as recreation departments, non-profit community organizations, such as food banks, camps, houses of worship and others.

Sponsors typically provide food to other organizations that have sites where children gather, such as recreation centers, libraries and summer camps. The reimbursement rate for this program is higher than the school meals program rate. Federal dollars can be used to cover food, operations and administrative costs.

Schools can also provide summer meals under the National School Lunch Program, either through the Seamless Summer Option or the academic program, which serves students who are in summer school.

The reimbursement rate for this program is lower than the Summer Food Service Program, but the paperwork and implementation are less burdensome because school districts administer meal service similar to that provided during the school year, using existing vendors and staff.

School districts can apply to participate in any or all of the three programs. Municipalities and community organizations are only eligible for the Summer Food Service Program.

New Jersey Department of Agriculture staff help potential sponsors decide which of the federal programs best fit their program and community needs.

Additionally, department staff provide technical support and assistance to potential sponsors to complete their applications and tailor programs to match the needs of the children they would serve.

Providing summer meals does present certain logistical challenges to communities, including:

- Start-up paperwork
- Meeting stringent federal meal service, accounting and program operation requirements
- Building programs that attract a consistent number of children each day during the summer months
- Raising awareness in the community about the availability of summer meals.

These logistical challenges can be met, however, resulting in more children having the nutrition they need to stay healthy during the summer months and return to school ready to learn, summer meal sponsors say. In fact, sponsors across New Jersey routinely navigate the logistics of providing children with meals during the summer.

Following are key recommendations to ensure all children have adequate summertime nutrition:

Partner to expand meals. Expanding summer meal programs starts in the community. Local government, school leaders and community organizations in high-need, low-participation communities should work together to identify summer meal sponsors and sites and partner to meet the logistical challenges of implementing such a program, with help from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.

Implement innovative strategies to ensure high participation. For example, the City of Perth Amboy has paired its summer meals program with a literacy program in its public schools. Some towns provide lunch in the library, while other communities have begun serving lunch through their housing authorities. These types of creative approaches can ensure more children receive the nutrition they need during the summer months.

Reduce paperwork. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture should continue to implement strategies to make the paperwork less burdensome for sponsors.

Make meal site locations available early in the summer. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture must ensure that all site locations are widely distributed and included in the USDA online directory by the beginning of July at the latest.

Conduct effective outreach. Summer meal sponsors, with assistance from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, should engage in aggressive community outreach to ensure the programs reach all children in need.

About the NJ Food for Thought Campaign



The NJ Food for Thought Campaign is a coalition of education and anti-hunger organizations, child advocates, state agencies and national organizations. The campaign has successfully increased student participation in the federal School Breakfast Program and is now also working to expand summer meals to children across New Jersey.

For more information, visit
njschoolbreakfast.org.

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To learn more about the campaign, visit njschoolbreakfast.org.

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