

Summer Meals Spreading Across New Jersey State Seeking 2018 Summer Meals Providers



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Summer meals continue to spread across the Garden State, as more schools, local governments and community organizations step up to serve food to hungry children during the summer.

By Nancy Parello

This is important for all children, but especially critical for children who rely on school meals during the academic year. For these children, when school is out, hunger sets in, as families struggle to stretch tight budgets and pay for additional child care.

According to data provided by the USDA and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, New Jersey communities fed about 94,800 children on an average day in July 2017 through two federal summer meals programs — the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

That represents a 27 percent increase since 2015, translating to nearly 20,000 more children receiving food on a typical day in July 2017. This pushed New Jersey’s participation rate to 24 percent of students who received free or low-cost school lunch during the academic year — up from 19 percent in 2015.

Nearly 3.2 million summer meals were served by 116 sponsors at 1,372 sites across New Jersey, including schools, parks, playgrounds, libraries, community pools, housing authorities and other places where children congregate in the summer. The number of meal sites grew 23 percent from 2015 to 2017, while the number of meals served increased 16 percent, according to state Department of Agriculture data.

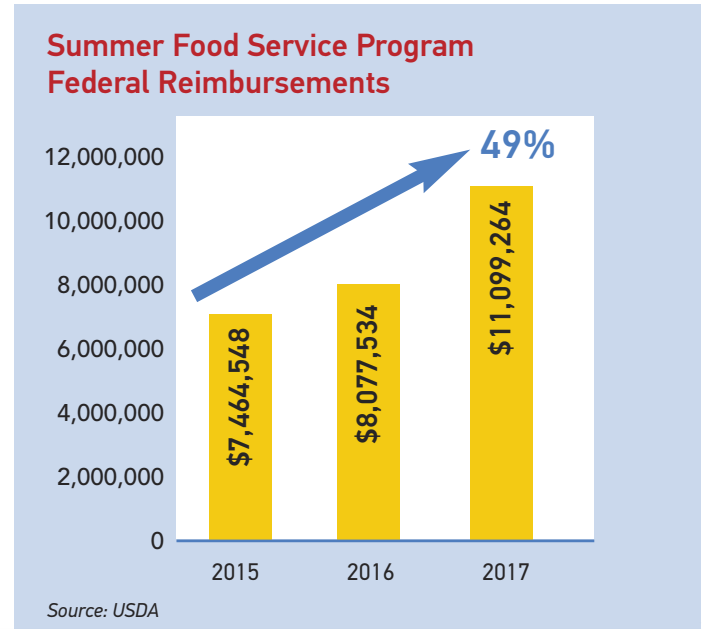
Along with the rise in participation came a jump in federal dollars flowing into New Jersey communities to feed children during the summer months. Federal reimbursements for the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) shot up 49 percent to \$11 million in 2017, compared to about \$7.4 million in 2015, according to the USDA, which administers the program on the federal level.

This progress was fueled 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 and to spread the word about summer meals — and to communities that responded to this need to feed more children during the summer months.

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

If New Jersey achieved that goal, the state would collect an additional estimated \$6.6 million dollars each year to feed hungry children during the summer, according to FRAC’s *Hunger Doesn’t Take A Vacation: Summer Meals Status Report, 2017*, based on 2016 participation.

The statistics in this report are preliminary and may be subject to change.



Summer Meals Child Participation			
	Average Participation, July of Each Year	Meals Served, July of Each Year	Participation Rate as a Percent of Students Receiving Free/Reduced Price School Lunch
2015	74,808	2,740,340	19
2016	90,752	2,715,614	23
2017	94,803	3,173,617	24
Percent Change 15-17	27	16	26

Summer Meals Combat Childhood Hunger

Without free- or reduced-priced school meals, children often face hunger during the summer, especially those who rely on school meals during the academic year. Many New Jersey food pantries report that more families turn to them for food in the summer months to replace the meals provided by schools.

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.

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. At sites that are open to the public, children can simply show up and receive a meal, which must meet federal nutrition standards, including low-fat, low-sugar and whole-grain foods.



Join in Feeding Children this Summer!

As the availability of summer meals continues to grow, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture is conducting outreach throughout the state to recruit new sponsors and sites. The department has also encouraged existing sponsors to add new sites for 2018, state officials said.

Through this program, the USDA funds organizations to "sponsor" summer meals sites. Sponsors can be schools, local government agencies, camps, non-profit organizations and private, non-profit and faith-based organizations.

Sponsors are responsible for ensuring that meals are provided to all sites under their jurisdiction and must meet USDA meal requirements. Sites must be located in a safe, supervised settings and can include schools, parks, community centers, health clinics, hospitals, libraries, fire stations, apartment complexes and migrant centers. Sites work directly with sponsors to provide quality food to children throughout the summer.

To learn more about how to become a sponsor or site in the Summer Food Service Program, contact the New Jersey Department of Agriculture at 609-292-4498 or SFSPCommunication@ag.nj.gov.

Outreach Key to Successful Summer Meals Operations

While New Jersey communities have made strong strides in serving summer meals, it is critical that parents and other caregivers know where these sites are located. Timely, effective marketing and promotion can significantly increase children's participation in summer meals programs, ensuring all children have the summertime nutrition they need to be healthy and return to school in September ready to learn.

To achieve that goal, summer meal sponsors should partner with other community organizations to spread the word through schools, child care centers, libraries and other organizations serving children in a community.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey, as co-leader of the New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign, has created an

easy-to-use summer meals outreach kit, with ideas about how communities can partner to spread the word about summer meals.

Key strategies include:

- School outreach
- Kick-off events
- A summer meals "blitz"
- Community engagement
- Media outreach
- Social media

View the toolkit at https://acnj.org/downloads/2017_05_04_summer_meals_toolkit.pdf

How Do You Find Summer Meals Sites?

The USDA operates an online and texting directory of meal sites. States must provide site information to the USDA to be included in the national database. In recent years, however, New Jersey encountered difficulties with getting accurate information into USDA's system in a timely manner.

State agriculture officials have said protocols are now in place that will ensure the timely uploading of accurate site information, making it much easier for parents and other caregivers to find sites.

The USDA summer meals sitefinder can be found at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/summerfoodrocks> or by texting "food" to 877-877. The site is not typically operational until May or June of each year.

About the NJ Food for Thought Campaign

The New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign is a coalition of education, health and anti-hunger organizations, child advocates, local and state agencies and national organizations working to end childhood hunger in New Jersey. The campaign has helped to grow child participation in the federal School Breakfast Program and Summer Food Service Program.

For more information, visit njfoodforthought.org.

Bridgeton Takes Meals on the Road

Bridgeton Mayor Albert Kelly turned a \$10,000 grant into a bright, inviting mobile meals bus that serves up both tasty food and engaging books to area children – many of whom lack transportation to summer meals sites.

The Healthy Food Express was launched last summer after Kelly used a grant from Ocean First, a local foundation, to retrofit a former Head Start school bus. The seats were removed and flooring, refrigeration units and electrical outlets were installed. The outside of the bus was brightly painted with pictures of children and slogans like, "Eat Healthy Every Day."

Last summer, the bus not only helped feed area children who could not travel to a meal site, it brought nutrition to senior citizens and others in need, says Kelly, who also serves as executive director of Gateway Community Action Partnership.

"We were able to distribute excess food we received from farmers, from our farm that Gateway runs and from donations from area supermarkets," Kelly explains. "This is also a mobile library, so we can take educational materials to give to our youth."



This year, plans call for adding an awning to the bus to provide shelter from the hot summer sun and a PA system to broadcast the bus' arrival, Kelly adds.

The bus will go to "where the need is, from Bridgeton and beyond," he says, citing housing projects, city streets, parks and libraries.

"We have hungry children and hungry citizens in our communities and not everyone can make it to a meal site," he notes. "We're looking to partner with other organizations that would like to work with us, to spread out and make sure we find the right sites that will feed as many children as we can."

To learn more, call Gateway Community Action Partnership at (856) 455-7288.

Snacks and Dinners Boost Summer Meals in East Orange

When school lets out, the City of East Orange kicks into high gear.

The city's Department of Recreation & Cultural Affairs leads a thriving summer meals program, with city leaders always exploring new ways to reach more children.

One of its most successful strategies is an aggressive outreach effort that spreads the word to parents and other caregivers in five ways -- social media, a kickoff event, banners placed in each city ward, postcards distributed to parents through the schools and word-of-mouth by student ambassadors who tell their peers about the program.

"We work with the East Orange School District, the East Orange Public Library and the East Orange Youth Coalition/Student Ambassadors to get the word out," says Ravi A. Boze-Adams, chief clerk, afterschool & summer food program director. "We reach the masses with technology, fun community events and good old-fashioned grassroots feet to the pavement."

City officials are also willing to embrace new approaches when the old ones do not appear to be working.

Last summer was a great example of this. After reviewing participation data and learning that the city parks were averaging only 15 children for breakfast and 25 for lunch, the city decided to try serving a snack at 3:30 p.m. and dinner at 5:30 p.m.

"Many parents were sending their children to supervised camps or to the school district's summer enrichment programs, so there were less children in the parks in the morning and noon day," Boze-Adams explains.



With the switch to snacks and dinner, participation skyrocketed, with the city serving almost 78,000 more meals last summer — a whopping 77 percent increase.

"We served 36,000 dinners and 36,000 snacks," Boze-Adams says. "We were very successful and very pleased with our decision to switch."

She strongly recommends this approach to other summer meal sponsors.

"More children are in the parks in the afternoon and evening after camp, after summer school and after summer youth employment," Boze-Adams explains. "If your goal is to help stop childhood hunger, this is a great way to achieve that goal."

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