

**Overcoming Barriers to Participation in the
Summer Food Service Program -
An Identification of Best Practice Solutions**



National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi
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**National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi**

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

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PURPOSE

The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

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**OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE SUMMER FOOD
SERVICE PROGRAM - AN IDENTIFICATION OF BEST PRACTICE SOLUTIONS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1968, Congress created the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to provide nutritious meals to low-income children when school is not in session. Each SFSP site is operated by an SFSP sponsor. The sponsor is financially responsible for the operation of the program and assures that all protocol associated with the program are followed. In previous years, attempts have been made to increase the number of sponsors enrolled in the program as a means of increasing the number of sites, ultimately increasing the number of children participating in the program.

In an attempt to increase sponsors' participation in the SFSP, Richard Lugar (R-IN) proposed the Lugar Summer Food Pilot. In 2001, this pilot allowed 13 states to operate under a program called the Simplified Summer Food Program, which simplified the financial and administrative paperwork associated with SFSP. In January 2005, six additional states were allowed to participate in the program. A second program, the Seamless Summer Food Waiver, also was created to increase the number of sponsors participating in SFSP. With this program, food service programs in school districts are allowed to run the program as a continuation of the National School Lunch Program, rather than having to recreate accounting methods in the summer.

Although the Simplified Summer Food Program has increased participation by sponsors, the Seamless Summer Food Waiver has had a minimal effect on participation. Even with the best efforts of sponsors at the local level, less than twenty percent of all eligible children

participated in the feeding program in 2004. Additionally, there is no research to date that explores the benefits and barriers to a sponsor's participation in the SFSP. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to evaluate the SFSP sponsor's perception of the benefits and barriers related to operating the program and to assess practices used by sponsors to increase participation by eligible children.

Phase I of the research included 21 telephone interviews (nine state agency directors and twelve SFSP sponsors). Participants in this phase of the research were asked similar questions regarding benefits and barriers to a sponsor's participation and factors influencing the participation by eligible children. Six themes emerged from the telephone interviews: barriers related to a sponsor starting a program, reasons a sponsor might leave or discontinue a program, resources that are beneficial to a sponsor operating a program, benefits to children participating in the program, barriers that would prevent an eligible child from participating in the program, and methods used to increase participation in the program.

Phase II of the research included the development of a questionnaire that was sent to 803 SFSP sponsors in the southeast region. A total of seven primary questions were included in the survey. Under each of the seven questions, questions with likert-type responses were asked of the sponsors. The seven questions were:

- 1) In your opinion, how would a sponsor who has left the program rate the following reasons for not wanting to start another program in the future?
- 2) Rate the following reasons that a sponsor may give for leaving or discontinuing a program. With regards to participation, how would you rate each of the following items that might affect participation by eligible children?

- 3) Rate each of the following methods used to increase participation in the Summer Food Service Program in your area.
- 4) Rate the importance of each of the following resources that would be beneficial to a sponsor operating a Summer Food Service Program.
- 5) Rate the importance of each of the following benefits of the Summer Food Service Program.
- 6) Rate the importance of each of the following methods to increase participation in the Summer Food Service Program in your area.

In addition to these questions, demographic data including grade level primarily served, location, reason participating in SFSP, participation in the Simplified Summer Food Program, number of sites sponsored, and number of meals produced also were included in the survey.

A total of 316 completed surveys were used in the data analysis. Sites primarily served children in upper elementary grades (53.9%). Only 34.3% operated under the Simplified Summer Food Program. The average number of years sponsoring a program was 9.9 years, and sponsors oversaw an average of 14.5 sites and served an average of 904.9 meals.

Providing nutritious meals to children was seen as the most important benefit of the program. Sponsors believed the large volume of paperwork was the primary reason an individual would not want to start a program and the primary reason a sponsor would leave/discontinue a program. The most crucial resource in starting and operating a program was having adequate and appropriate staff to help with meal production. Most respondents strongly agreed that a primary reason for lack of participation by eligible children was insufficient transportation to the feeding sites. Advertising programs in areas frequented by families of

eligible children and having an activity associated with the program were seen as the most beneficial means to increase participation by children.

Differences in benefits and barriers to participation were evaluated based on demographic data. Researchers analyzed the data to look for differences based on the age of the children served, whether or not the sponsors participated in the SFSP, number of years as a sponsor, number of meals served on a daily basis, and the number of weeks the SFSP operates. There were no differences in responses to each of the questions based on any of the demographic data collected.

In order to enhance the number of individuals sponsoring SFSP sites, resources need to be enhanced and made available to support the SFSP sponsors. In addition to providing training to the sponsors in the spring prior to the start of the program, the state serves as a resource during the program to help resolve problems and clarify any issues faced by the sponsor. The main barrier to an individual participating in the SFSP as a sponsor was the large amount of paperwork involved in the program. However, only 34% of our sample operated under the simplified program, which may have influenced this result. If more sponsors operated under the Simplified Summer Food Program it may help to reduce the perceived barrier of overwhelming paperwork.

Transportation was the primary issue related to participation by eligible children. Some of the recommendations that were made to help improve access to the site may help others boost participation, though it appears that good advertising in communities/areas visited by families of eligible children is most often used to increase the number of children participating in the program. Another concern was the ability of a site to sustain its efforts in providing meals.