



Keeping Kids Healthy and Engaged When School is Out Through Public and Affordable Housing Communities

Introduction: Kids Don't Stop Growing When School is Out

In California, more than 3.7 million students were eligible for free or reduced priced school meals in the 2017-2018 school year. For many of those students, school meals are the primary source of regular access to healthy food. When the bell rings at 3:00 or lets out for summer break, many of those students go home to nutritional uncertainty or high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. For many low-income families, the out-of-school-time food access gap increases family stress: limited budgets are stretched further to cover food, rent, utilities, transportation, medications, and childcare costs. For very young children, food insecurity can negatively impact brain and physical development. For children of all ages, disrupted

access to healthy food can impact behavior, increase risk of obesity, make it harder to concentrate, or exacerbate existing health conditions like type 2 diabetes. The impact is not limited to summer, and can lead to a rocky start to the school year, negatively impacting school attendance and students' ability to effectively participate in school.

USDA Child Nutrition Programs Address the Out-of-School-Time Gap

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Summer Food Service Program and Child and Adult Care Food Programs enable schools, as well as city, county, tribal, and nonprofit agencies to serve free, healthy meals to youth ages 18 and under in low-income neighborhoods when

school is out of session. Agencies are reimbursed for the meals through USDA, administered in California through the California Department of Education (CDE). These programs enable agencies to redirect their limited resources toward other priorities, while allowing them to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other foods that meet the nutritional needs of growing children and teens.



Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) / Seamless Summer Food Option (SSFO)

Perhaps the easiest and most impactful way to ensure that children and teens stay healthy during the summer, and on track academically, is through the USDA summer meal programs. The easiest way to think about summer meals is to imagine a summer arm of the National School Lunch Program. Many school districts operate the Seamless Summer Feeding Option (SSFO) because it allows them to simply extend their school-year breakfast and lunch operations. School districts can provide free meals to all kids in the community at school sites or at locations in the community, such as parks, libraries, or affordable housing locations. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is similar to SSFO, but it also enables local government agencies, like city park and recreation departments, community-based agencies (e.g., a church, mosque, youth development nonprofit), tribal agencies, or affordable housing communities, to administer the program and be reimbursed for offering free meals to children and youth ages 18 and under. Both programs allow agencies to serve free, healthy meals to all children and youth in the community. These programs do not require any paperwork for families. There is no income verification, application, or identification needed. Children can simply show up during the time of meal service to receive a meal, making it an easy-to-utilize resource, particularly in communities where there may be a reluctance or fear of utilizing public programs.

Sites may offer breakfast, lunch, snack, supper, or any combination of the two, except for lunch and supper. Some meal providers may be able to provide shelf-stable weekend meals too, making weekend breakfast an ideal additional option for those able to offer it.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Snack and Supper Program

The CACFP snack and supper program enables agencies to offer a free healthy snack, or more substantial meal, often called “super snack” or “supper” to children after school, during the school year. The primary difference between the summer and afterschool meal programs is that a learning or enrichment activity must be offered in conjunction with the meals served after school. The enrichment activity may be a formal afterschool program or a simple “homework help” program. The type of activity may be subject to approval by CDE. Children are not required to participate in the activity, but one must be offered.

How Do The Programs Work?¹

For both SFSP/SSFO and CACFP, the meal sponsor, often a school district, city/county agency, or nonprofit organization, acts as the administrative and fiscal agent for the program. The sponsor provides the meals that are served at the site. Meal service must comply with requirements specified by USDA and the state agency.

The meal site, such as a housing community, is the physical location where the meals are served. Site staff are tasked with handling and serving meals, monitoring food to ensure it complies with health and safety regulations and other program rules, such as tracking the number of meals served, and record-keeping. The meal site may be a site that is open to the whole community or a closed enrolled site for children enrolled in an on-site program. For housing communities where there may be safety concerns about being an open site, it may be more appropriate to work with the meal sponsor to be an open restricted meal site. Meal sponsors are required to provide training for meal site representatives to educate them on the rules and process of operating and monitoring the meal service. In some communities, a school district meal sponsor may be able to send a staff member to serve the meals, enabling the site to simply supply the space. Meals must be eaten on-site and may not be consumed by adults.²

¹ This is intended as general guidance only. Please visit USDA’s website to learn more about program regulations about [SFSP](#) and [CACFP](#), or contact your school district.

² This can be a challenge in communities where adult hunger is also an issue or where it is standard for families to eat together. Your meal provider may be able to offer adult meals for purchase or absorb the cost of adult volunteers. See USDA for [official guidance](#).

Who is Eligible to Serve Meals?

Eligible low-income sites are those in which at least 50% of students who reside in the area are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Area eligibility can be determined using school or census data, or the [Food Research and Action Center \(FRAC\) Mapper tool](#). For agencies that wish to provide meals to children or youth in an enrolled program only as a closed enrolled site, the program must establish the individual eligibility of each student enrolled in the program to meet the eligibility threshold.

How Can Public and Affordable Housing Communities Get Involved?

The easiest way for housing communities to get started with out-of-school-time USDA child nutrition programs is with a summer meal program because of the community need and the relative ease of finding meal providers and supporting partners.

Despite the convenience of summer meal programs for families, these programs are underutilized across California and the nation. In 2017, only 14% of eligible children in California accessed a summer meal program in their community.³

Underutilization is usually due to:

- **A lack of accessible sites.** Families may lack transportation to get to the nearest site or there may not be a site in the neighborhood.
- **Unappealing sites.** Many school districts provide summer meals for students participating in school-based summer learning programs on school campuses. These summer meal programs are open to other children in the community, but tend to be underutilized because they lack activities for non-enrolled children, or families may be unfamiliar with that school campus. This can make families feel unwelcome or increase stigma around accessing the meal service.
- **Lack of activities.** Summer meals alone are not enough to draw significant numbers of children. Families are often looking for activities during the summer because many of these same children often don't have access to summer enrichment programs.
- **Safety.** In many communities, parents do not want their children leaving the safety of their home, due to neighborhood violence, busy streets, or other concerns. This can often leave children at home with limited access to food.
- **Lack of community awareness.** Often, the community is unaware of the availability of summer meal sites in their community, or may not be aware that they are open to all children and youth in the community.

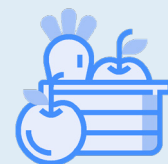
³ Source: [California Food Policy Advocates](#).

What Are the Benefits of Serving Summer Meals in Housing Communities?

Housing organizations have the potential to operate successful summer meal programs because of their infrastructure and ability to address many of these barriers and provide needed support to their resident families. Summer meal programs offer many benefits for youth, families, and housing agencies.

Summer Meal Program Benefits:

- **Housing agencies can spend less on food and snacks, while offering healthier food choices.**
- The balanced nutrition of summer meals helps students stay healthy when school is out, enabling children and youth to start school ready to learn.
- The regular availability of healthy food for children provides reassurance to struggling families, lowering family stress and strengthening relationships between resident families and housing providers.
- Food provides an added incentive to participate in housing-based expanded learning (afterschool and summer) programs.
- The consistent access to healthy meals, particularly summer breakfast, supports children's ability to start the day with improved concentration and positively impacts behavior.
- The meals offer an opportunity to introduce children to new foods and provide a venue for nutrition education.
- The availability of meals can provide opportunities to meet youth residents who are otherwise not engaged in housing programs, or who might slip through the cracks at school or at home.
- The absence of paperwork for families reduces stigma and can engage families who may be reluctant to use public programs.



How Do We Get Started?

November–January: Find a meal provider

Once you've established the need for summer meals, the easiest way to get started is to determine if there is already a meal provider in your community. Working with an existing meal provider makes it easier for a housing community to fit into an existing process and spare itself from the start-up costs and learning curve of starting a program on your own. [California Department of Education](#) offers a list of meal providers from the previous year that can help identify potential meal providers in your area. The [USDA Capacity Builder](#) provides a wealth of information, including meal providers, nearby sites (from the previous summer), census data-based area eligibility, and other agencies that may provide potential partnership opportunities. Local school districts are often meal providers and may provide the most seamless experience by sharing their existing infrastructure, experience, and year-round housing–school partnerships. It is ideal to contact the school district in January when they begin their summer planning. Once you've established a relationship with a meal provider, they will confirm eligibility and

3 Pro Tips

- 1. Plan for staffing.** Add measures for redundancy. For example, training multiple people to support the program and developing duplicate binders with paperwork and clear instructions can reduce the chances of disruption to the program.
- 2. Consider condiments.** Children may not be immediately willing to eat food that is unfamiliar or that seems uninteresting. Condiments like ranch, sriracha, or other spices may improve food desirability while giving children some decision-making power.
- 3. See the program as a door opener.** Keep in mind that the program provides an opportunity to start a conversation with youth who may be reluctant to participate in programs or who staff haven't seen before. They may not be willing to immediately participate, but their curiosity about the program opens a door for communication and small steps toward building a relationship.

—Sara Christensen,
Alameda Point Collaborative

provide training on operating a summer meal site. If your agency chooses to sponsor its own program, you will need to [submit a SFSP sponsor application](#) to CDE's Nutrition Services Division.

November–May: Start planning and identify any gaps in capacity

The key to a successful summer meal program is to begin the planning process early (even prior to confirming your site as a summer meal site) to ensure your agency has capacity for implementation—or can identify partners to help. It is crucial to plan for staffing and back-up staffing, meal service location, complementary activities, and promotion strategies to set your program up for success. Staffing can be the biggest challenge for already stretched housing agencies, so it is crucial to proactively address that upfront. It is also worth incorporating strategies for how to provide great customer service to maintain participation.

February–May: Plan to make your program appealing; identify partners to help if needed

Participation in summer meal programs is often dependent on making the programs appealing to children and families. Because the meals must be eaten on-site and cannot be brought back to families' homes, it is important to transform the on-site environment into a place where children want to be. Activities may be as simple as chalk hopscotch in the courtyard, coloring activities, or bingo in the community room. This is also an important venue to engage caregivers. It is an opportunity not to be missed, whether you used it to share additional resources, provide programs for parents, or an area to talk and build trusting relationships between staff and caregivers.

Summer meal programs provide a unique opportunity for collaboration with other agencies because of the way they can support multiple goals and child needs. For example, the local library may be able to provide complementary literacy and enrichment activities, engage youth in library summer reading programs, and encourage them to set summer reading goals. The health department may be able to offer nutrition education activities, physical activity games, or recipes for families. First 5, WIC, or local clinics can provide resources and education to assist families with young children. A local church or even teen residents may be able to fulfill lunch program staffing gaps. Summer meal programs provide an ideal youth development opportunity by building on young people's existing strengths and helping them develop new skills, which can build confidence and help them become college and career ready.



May–July: Promote your program

Effective promotion is key to a successful program. This includes appealing signage with days, times, and simplified language about what the program is offering (e.g., “Free healthy breakfast/lunch for kids 18 and under”). Signage should be inclusive of resident languages and literacy levels. Signage alone, however, is not enough to draw children if there is not already a strong foundation of trust and relationships. Individual, warm outreach to families to invite them to the program along with a clear explanation that it is healthy and truly free can significantly increase participation. Teen residents with energy and sufficient training can be true assets to outreach efforts. It is important to keep in mind that adequate participation is essential for your meal provider’s financial capacity to serve meals at your site, due to the food and labor costs involved. In addition, summer meal programs offer an opportunity to host events in collaboration with community partners in the middle or end of summer, making sure kids are fed while providing fun activities. For example, you can help families prepare for school by leveraging the final days of your summer meal program to host a Back to School event with school supplies, help with school meal applications, activities provided by community partners, and resources from the school district. It can also provide an opportunity to promote or get family feedback on needs for housing-based programs during the school year.



August–October: Host a summer debrief

Hosting a debrief meeting with your team and if possible, your meal provider, can provide an invaluable opportunity to highlight successes and areas for improvement for next year. It is also important to solicit feedback from children and their caregivers about the program. Food quality is one of the most common points of feedback that arises. This can often be addressed to some extent with the meal provider by working creatively to leverage meal programs as venues to try new menu items and offering taste tests for kids to provide feedback, or removing the unpopular items from next year’s menu. Summer meal programs provide a unique opportunity to positively interact with families while providing an important service. It can also serve as a vital way to increase team cohesiveness and morale. There is no question that it can add minor additional demands on staff, yet the opportunity to deliver truly meaningful work and know that they are making a difference in the lives of resident youth and families is deeply powerful for staff.

How Do We Offer Meals or Snacks Year-Round?

In many communities, a growing number of school districts and nonprofit agencies are operating the CACFP Afterschool Meal Program to provide additional nutritional support to children and youth in the after-school hours during the school year. It may be easier to start with a summer meal program because of subtle programmatic differences—primarily CACFP’s requirement of an enrichment component—but ultimately it is up to the housing agency where it would like to start and if it would like to offer both summer and afterschool meals. The best place to start with CACFP Afterschool Meals is by contacting your school district nutrition services department to find out if they provide meals or snacks to community sites. CDE may also be able to help [locate a local CACFP Afterschool Meal provider](#).

Conclusion: Food Builds Community

Taking on new programs can always feel like a daunting endeavor at first. There are many resources and supportive partners available to help your agency implement USDA summer and/or afterschool meal programs. Partnership for Children & Youth’s HousED Network can connect you with other public and affordable housing communities that are successfully operating meal programs to assist you in your journey. Those that do offer meals have the same feedback: It does more than feed kids. It builds relationships and strengthens the community by decreasing social isolation, facilitating opportunities for interaction between children and family residents, and strengthening relationships between residents and housing staff. Food is one of the few things that has the power to cut across the many lines that sometimes divide our communities and bring people together.



Additional Resources

[USDA Summer Food Service Program Toolkit](#)

[How Housing Communities Can Feed Children webinar](#)

[FRAC Summer and Afterschool Meal Mapper](#)

[FRAC Summer and Afterschool Meal Program Resource Library](#)

[California Department of Education Child Nutrition Programs and Contacts](#)

If you have questions or would like additional support or training to implement these programs, please contact support@partnerforchildren.org.

Acknowledgements

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Partnership for Children & Youth (PCY) is an advocacy and capacity-building organization championing high-quality, equitable learning opportunities for underserved youth in California. Grounded in research and experience, PCY trains school and community-based educators, facilitates relationships between schools and community-based organizations, and advocates for effective public policies and resources. Through the HousED initiative, PCY increases the accessibility and quality of educational supports in public and affordable housing communities, creating pathways out of poverty. Learn more at www.partnerforchildren.org/housing-and-education.