ARE MOBILE MEALS RIGHT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?

Mobile meals provide an opportunity to serve kids in hard-to-reach places who may not have access to traditional meal sites. Mobile meals also require significant planning, coordination, and creative problem solving to be successful. This resource will help you make a preliminary assessment to determine community need and organizational capacity for a mobile meals solution in your community.

Before You Begin: Does Your Community Need a Mobile Meals Program?

Take a step back and talk with community partners to determine whether there is a demonstrated need for mobile meals. The following questions are meant to help you think through which service model will best serve your target audience, and they should also provide valuable insight to guide planning moving forward:
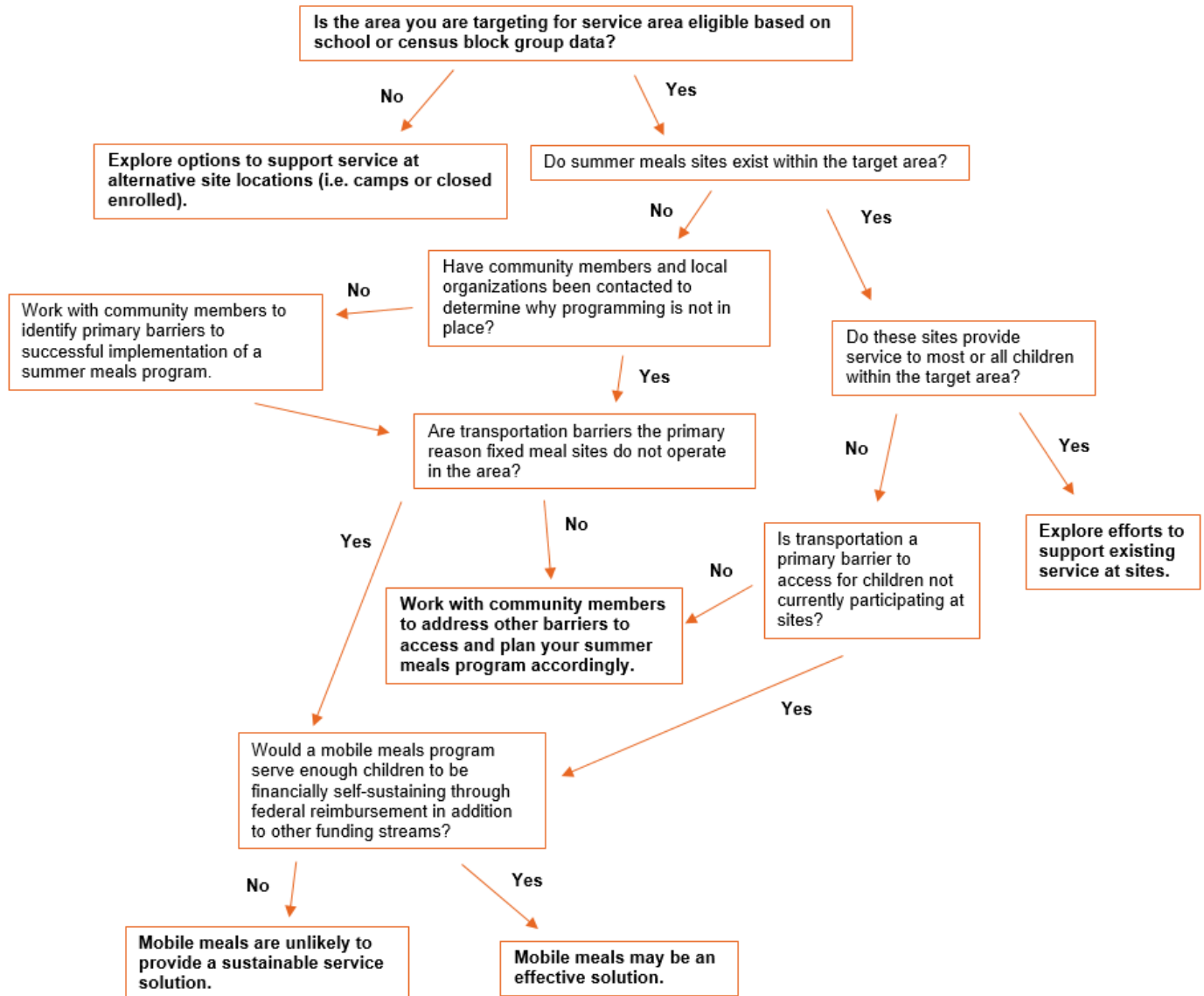
- Is the geographic area you have identified for the mobile meals program area eligible? Area eligibility is based on demonstrated community need through school free and reduced or census block group data, as specified by USDA.[1] If the location is not area eligible for a mobile meals program, is there potential for a closed enrolled site?

- Have options for service at fixed site locations been exhausted? Refer to the Mobile Meals Decision Tree to guide your assessment.

- Are children living in the targeted area currently unable to access fixed summer meal site locations? Is transportation a primary barrier to access?

- Can these children easily access the location(s) where you plan to serve mobile meals, without significant physical barriers or safety concerns limiting access?

If you answered 'yes' to all of the questions above, and the decision tree on page two indicates that mobile meals are an effective solution, then the operating landscape for mobile meals is likely a favorable one. The next step is to assess your organizational capacity to design and successfully implement a mobile meals program.

If you answered 'no' to one or more questions above, and/or the decision tree indicates that mobile meals are not currently the optimal service model for the target community, then additional planning or an alternative solution may be needed. This could include expanded support for fixed meal sites or other solutions that fall outside of the scope of federally funded Child Nutrition Programs.

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[1]The No Kid Hungry Averaged Eligibility Map will show you if a given location is area eligible based on the USDA Food and Nutrition Service's averaging policy. Eligibility information provided in the mapping tool corresponds to census block group data and does not include eligibility estimations based on school meal enrollment data.

Mobile Meals Decision Tree

Is the area you are targeting for service area eligible based on school or census block group data?

No → **Explore options to support service at alternative site locations (i.e. camps or closed enrolled).**

Yes → **Do summer meals sites exist within the target area?**

No → **Have community members and local organizations been contacted to determine why programming is not in place?**

No → **Work with community members to identify primary barriers to successful implementation of a summer meals program.**

Yes → **Are transportation barriers the primary reason fixed meal sites do not operate in the area?**

Yes → **Do these sites provide service to most or all children within the target area?**

No → **Is transportation a primary barrier to access for children not currently participating at sites?**

Yes → **Explore efforts to support existing service at sites.**

No → **Work with community members to address other barriers to access and plan your summer meals program accordingly.**

Yes (from Are transportation barriers) → **Would a mobile meals program serve enough children to be financially self-sustaining through federal reimbursement in addition to other funding streams?**

Yes (from Is transportation a primary barrier) → **Would a mobile meals program serve enough children to be financially self-sustaining through federal reimbursement in addition to other funding streams?**

No → **Mobile meals are unlikely to provide a sustainable service solution.**

Yes → **Mobile meals may be an effective solution.**

Is Your Organization Ready to Manage A Mobile Meals Program?

A second question to consider alongside the need for mobile meals is whether your organization has the capacity to successfully design and implement such a program. Use the following considerations to guide your assessment:

- Does your organization possess staff capacity to identify potential sites, design an effective mobile meals program, run daily operations, and conduct monitoring and evaluation for program improvement?

- Has your organization been an SFSP sponsor in the past? It is strongly recommended that sponsors have at least one year of experience successfully operating the program before taking on mobile meals.

- Do you have strong relationships with organizations that could promote the program, such as nonprofit organizations, community leaders, school districts, and influential community members?

- Is your organization committed to developing a sustainable plan for mobile meals beyond the first year of operation?

Can You Afford to Operate A Mobile Meals Program?

Finally, it is important to consider whether your organization, either individually or in partnership with others, can pay to operate a mobile meals program. Mobile programs tend to have higher costs than programs operating only fixed sites, including a larger staffing model and additional vehicle and equipment costs. Make sure the numbers work and think through all of the financial implications before moving forward. If an area eligible location appears to be a good fit for programming, reach out to community organizations to cultivate partnerships that can help mitigate the risk of operating a mobile meals program. Additionally, No Kid Hungry has developed a Summer Meals Calculator to help you forecast start-up costs, clarify operating assumptions, and predict budget surplus or shortfall based on federal reimbursement and other revenue streams that may be in place.

As stated earlier, successful mobile meals programs require careful planning, coordination, and creative problem solving to be successful. Budget planning and breakeven analyses should account for the financial impact of program participation numbers that exceed or fall short of initial projections. Your organization may have existing resources or grants to help cover unexpected costs or choose to fundraise for a mobile program. Financially sustainable mobile programs keep costs low while serving a high enough volume of kids for federal reimbursement dollars, which when paired with other revenue sources, reliably cover program costs. To achieve this, most successful programs keep the cost of providing a meal lower than the federal reimbursement rate.

The following tactics are useful ways to lower mobile meals programming costs while maintaining quality:

- Reduce food costs through bulk purchasing and a competitive vendor procurement process.
- Reduce food waste by tracking average daily participation, adjusting food orders, and incorporating children's food preferences through taste tests and surveys.
- Find transportation efficiencies by shortening routes or contracting with partners who have established capacity and expertise in the sector.

Special Consideration: Mobile Meals in Rural Communities

Mobile programs in rural communities may not be financially self-sustaining through federal reimbursement alone. This is because there are typically fewer children served at sites; sites are located farther apart; less federal reimbursement is collected; and various program delivery costs (i.e. fuel, staff time, etc.) are higher. While SFSP reimbursement rates are slightly higher for meals served in rural areas, the increased rate is nominal ($0.02-$0.06 per meal, depending on whether a snack, breakfast, or lunch is served) and sponsors report that it may not cover the added cost of serving children located in rural areas. Therefore, while programs in rural communities are frequently in high demand, sponsors should anticipate thinner operating margins than may be the case in suburban or urban communities. Be sure to consider the impact of population density on overall program operations and financial sustainability.

Next Steps

Based on an assessment of community needs, organizational capacity, and financial feasibility, you may decide that a "traditional" meals program with fixed sites would serve the community equally well at lower cost. Alternatively, you may discover that while a mobile meals program would be more effective at reaching children with meals, your organization does not possess the capacity or resources to implement such a program. However, if a preliminary analysis reveals that a mobile meals program is both needed and feasible to implement, the next step is to design a plan to do so. To get started, consult the Partnerships and Site Selection resource within No Kid Hungry's Mobile Meals Toolkit.