



CASE STUDY: FREE SUMMER MEALS AT HOSPITALS UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS CLEVELAND MEDICAL CENTER

Sponsor in Focus

University Hospitals is a multihospital health system serving Northeast Ohio. In 2017, University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center (CMC), a 1,036-bed hospital located just outside downtown Cleveland, applied to the Ohio Department of Education to sponsor a summer meals program. CMC served almost 5,000 free lunches to children in 2017 and grew to serve 9,422 meals in 2018 after expanding the program to six additional hospitals.

Key Stakeholders

CMC is the sponsor responsible for administration of the summer meals program, financial management, and site-level compliance. CMC receives reimbursement for meals served from the administering state agency, the Ohio Department of Education. Sodexo is the food service vendor for the program and coordinates operation of the summer meals program alongside regular food service operations. Sodexo is able to operate the summer meals program under their existing contract with the medical center; participation in summer meals generally does not represent a material change to the agreement already in place. University Hospitals Conneaut Medical Center also serves as a vendor, in partnership with Sodexo, to provide one additional unaffiliated summer meals site – Conneaut Human Resources Center, an offsite nonprofit organization – with nutritious bagged lunches. Conneaut Medical Center provided the nonprofit with 1,870 lunches in 2017 and 2,090 in 2018.

Another key stakeholder is the University Hospitals Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital, a 244-bed children's hospital located at CMC. A staff member from the Injury Prevention Center at the Children's Hospital is present at the welcome table to orient children and families to the program, provide a free meals voucher, and distribute free activity resources such as coloring sheets and crayons. In 2017, the Injury Prevention Center also worked with interns from Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.), a local organization placing high school students in summer work opportunities and internship positions. In partnership with the Injury Prevention Group, Y.O.U. staff placed flyers with the 'Bo the Carebear' mascot throughout the children's hospital to boost awareness of the program among children and families. CMC also promotes the program via flyers at nearby apartment complexes, posts on social media, flyers at local physician's offices and schools, and in coordination with the local food banks.

Program Operations

Participation in CMC's summer meals program is coordinated using a voucher system. Children check in at a welcome table near the cafeteria to request a voucher, which is then redeemed at the serving line and sales counter for a free meal. Flyers feature Bo the Carebear, a mascot representing the free meals program, and guide children and families to different stations within the cafeteria (hot line station, milk cooler, and checkout counter) to ensure that children selected all required meal components. In 2017 and 2018, the program operated using an offer-versus-serve (OVS) service model, which gives children the option to decline certain food items to cut down on food waste. In its first year, the program offered lunch only, but CMC added breakfast too in 2018.

As more University Hospitals learned of the program, administrators wanted to operate the program at their locations, as well. The program expanded to six additional hospital sites in 2018 and found success in all of them. The only challenge was that some hospitals, located in neighborhoods that are more residential, received more children than expected, but food service staff successfully adjusted and accommodated for the increased demand.

Outcomes and Next Steps

University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center has provided over 14,000 summer meals since the program began in 2017. Each summer, staff directly involved in the program indicate that participation increases over the summer as more families learn about the program, and staff make adjustments accordingly. CMC learned that, at their hospital, a staff person is required to direct children through the cafeteria given the size of the food service operations, but other University Hospitals that are located in smaller communities do not require the additional personnel.

CMC has found the summer meals program to be cost-neutral (i.e. federal reimbursement for meals served fully cover program administration and food service costs). Additionally, the program has a positive impact on overall employee satisfaction and engagement: staff serving meals to children are excited to provide the benefit of a free meal to children and families and they find these interactions to be overwhelmingly positive.

In 2019, CMC will go back to offering lunch only, as the USDA now requires three hours lapse between the end of one meal and the beginning of the next ([USDA Summer Meals Memoranda Rescission](#)). Because lunch will operate from 11AM-1PM in 2019, CMC thought it would be unlikely to have high participation in a breakfast program operating three hours earlier, from 7AM-8AM, during the summer months. The USDA also rescinded the waiver allowing the use of "offer-versus-serve" at locations that are not sponsored by a school food authority ([SP 10-2017, SFSP 06-2017](#)), so CMC will require all children to take all meal components in 2019.

CMC also plans to operate a take-home weekend meals program in 2019 in partnership with the Ohio Association of Food Banks. The program will deliver individually packaged, non-perishable meals to Cleveland Medical Center to distribute to children for the weekend, to ensure that they have enough to eat before returning to CMC for lunch on Monday!

