



A SUMMER MEALS CASE STUDY

GROWING FUTURES ALONG COUNTRY ROADS IN GARRETT COUNTY, MARYLAND

The Summer Food Service Program in Garrett County, Maryland grew from one site serving 7,263 meals in 2012 to 14 sites serving 13,459 meals in 2018. How did they do it?

Beginnings

In 2012, Garrett County Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) began operating the Summer Food Service Program to feed children and teens lunch during the summer. FNS opened their first official summer meals site at Garrett College to improve the health and nutrition of children in their community and to mitigate summer learning loss.

Because Garrett County is very rural, FNS recognized that there were pockets of unmet need due to distance from their initial summer meals site. In 2014, Garrett County FNS applied for and received a grant from No Kid Hungry to rent a van for the summer and add five additional feeding sites. The summer of 2015 brought another grant that once again allowed FNS to rent an additional van and add two more sites. During that summer, FNS moved one site across the street from a pavilion to the parking lot of an apartment complex. This move increased participation at that site by 28 children per day, but FNS did not have anywhere to shelter children from inclement weather. Rainy days became a big problem. Some caring parents opened their garages so the students could sit and eat their lunch in shelter, but FNS hoped to develop a more sustainable solution the following summer.

A Mobile Solution

Using a converted bus similar to others utilized around the state and country seemed to be the best way to reach more kids and provide shelter, but FNS determined this would be too costly. The bus would also need a wheelchair lift for both children and supplies. Additionally, FNS would not have a good use for the bus during the school year, as Garrett County does not own any buses. Consequently, they had to look for more practical and cost-effective alternatives. FNS considered a concession trailer and determined that seating could be added inside the trailer, and that the walk-in ramp/door provided needed accessibility. Furthermore, FNS staff could tow the trailer with a vehicle already owned by FNS, with no need for a commercial driver's license which would have otherwise been required to drive a converted bus. Use of a trailer instead of a bus also ensured that no motorized vehicle would sit



unused during the school year. Given these factors, a determination was made that a modified trailer was the best option to pursue in Garrett County.

While the USDA's Summer Food Service Program reimbursement covered the costs of food and labor required to prepare and serve the meals, it would not cover the cost of transporting meals to children. With the new trailer idea in mind, FNS applied for and received a USDA Rural Development Grant in the amount of \$44,950. Using these grant dollars, in combination with matching funds totaling \$15,000 from The Hilltop Fruit Market, The Farmers Market, Johnnies Restaurant and Supply, A. F. Wendling's Foodservice, and No Kid Hungry, FNS was able to purchase two mobile dining trailers and vehicles to tow them (pictured above). The Garrett County Public Schools Maintenance Department installed some old bus seats that had been donated from a bus that was taken out of service, along with tables to create interior booth seating for the children to enjoy their lunches. Extra legs had to be added to the seats, as bus seats only have one set of legs. There was no room for a serving line within the trailers, so FNS decided to serve meals from the trailers' concession windows to provide plenty of space for eating within the trailer. The mobile dining trailers afforded FNS the ability to pull into a summer meals site, open the doors, and feed children free lunches even in locations where there was no place to get out of bad weather or even to sit down.

Promoting the Program

FNS received some great assistance with promoting the program. The local paper advertised the program in its summer magazine, which lists all the events going on during the summer in all of Garrett County. The local radio station read the menu to listeners every morning, and FNS created its own webpage just for summer meals. FNS also promoted the program by providing free books for children at sites, through a partnership with the Maryland Book Bank (FNS employees would pick up books when in Baltimore for a meeting or training).. Some schools also cleaned out their libraries and donated books. The summer meals program had books all summer that children could take to read and keep.

The Friday before summer meals programming began, FNS did a test run to advertise the program and to make sure the truck and trailer would fit in all locations. Even then, children began coming to the trailer to see if lunch was available. FNS employees encouraged children to come back on Monday, the first day of the program. Fortunately, these children did come back, and continued to do so all summer. The next challenge was to figure out how to add some color to the trailers to promote the program and to attract the attention of children and parents. FNS worked with a local company to put together some colorful, fun graphics that could be seen as the trailers traveled throughout the county. FNS used the same graphics to make yard signs to display at sites. On the first Friday of service (after lunch, of course), FNS took the trailer into the shop to get its new look. By Sunday afternoon, the trailer was ready. The children did not miss a day of summer food service!



Lessons Learned

With help from community partners in both promoting the program, operating the program, and providing funding assistance, Garrett County FNS was able to increase the number of meals served by 85%, from 7,263 meals in 2012 to 13,459 meals in 2018.

Given their rural service area, Garrett County FNS has found their summer meals service to be much more effective operating as a mobile program that meets children where they are, instead of asking children and their families to cross long distances to get to a limited number of summer meals sites. When choosing the best sites for their mobile operations, FNS has come to recognize the importance of flexibility and finding ways to adjust meal service locations to maximize the number of children who can participate. Over the years, FNS has occasionally found that a site is not reaching the volume of kids they anticipated. However, FNS has always been able to find alternative sites nearby so that they can reach as many children as possible. This troubleshooting involves patience, flexibility, and communicating with both community partners and families who utilize the program to make necessary adjustments.