

MOBILE MEALS TOOLKIT: PARTNERSHIPS AND SITE SELECTION



INTRODUCTION

As you begin the process of developing your mobile meals program, you will face many choices of where to serve meals and what resources are needed to ensure viable and effective operations. In some cases, you may rely upon community partners to provide resources that are otherwise unavailable to your organization. This resource is designed to help you clarify what additional resources and community partners will be needed to sustain your program, take action to secure effective partnership, and conduct a landscape analysis to select meal site locations that correspond to areas of need and viable service. Please note that while these activities are presented separately for planning purposes, they often occur in parallel and are mutually reinforcing.

Leverage Planning Resources and Secure Partnership

As planning moves forward for your mobile meals program, it is important to make full use of the No Kid Hungry [Summer Meals Calculator](#) to guide planning and budgeting. The calculator is a resource to help you estimate fixed and variable costs and weigh them against anticipated revenue in your program. As a result, your team is better able to engage in accurate budget forecasting and adjust operations accordingly.

While mobile meal service and delivery programs may require resources or expertise beyond an organization's existing capacity, sponsors who engage in advance planning are able to identify these gaps and locate key partners and funding streams to put their programs on solid footing. As sponsors review their program budget and management plans to identify areas where additional resources are needed, the following considerations are helpful in connecting those needs to willing partners with both the interest and capacity to provide support.

Identify Needs to Inform Partnership

Local or state government, for-profit, and nonprofit partners can contribute capacity to your programs in a variety of ways. During the start-up process, grant funding and technical assistance to determine optimal site locations may be provided. Another common form of partnership involves in-kind support, whereby a government, nonprofit, or commercial entity provides access to vehicles, labor, discounted printing fees for outreach materials, or other necessary equipment. Partners may also coordinate volunteer opportunities to support your program or share key insights that support operations.

Partnership is most effective when it addresses an identified need and creates operational efficiencies. When seeking the right partner or partners to support your program, sponsors may consider the following:

- **What missing resources or capacities are needed to ensure a successful program?** This could include things like start-up costs, vended meals, or equipment. Your program may rely on partners to procure or retrofit a mobile delivery vehicle or purchase equipment to keep food hot or cold during transport. In addition, if a mobile meals model seems promising but your team does not have experience in this area, you may consider working with a vendor to contract out meal preparation and delivery. Another common area where sponsors seek additional resources or expertise is in marketing design, printing, and promotion. In addition, either professional or volunteer labor hours may be needed to ensure meal preparation and service, either temporarily or for the duration of the summer. Lastly, partnering organizations can help increase meal participation by incorporating activities at sites. Use findings from your assessment to point you toward appropriate community partners.

- **What missing information is needed to ensure a successful program?** Look for organizations and leaders who can provide key insights about where children and families spend time during the summer months and who possess trusted communication channels that can be used to share information about summer meals with your target audience. Work with these partners to fine-tune projections for mobile meal site locations and to amplify outreach to children and families.
- **Is there an opportunity to co-brand or co-locate services?** Seek out partnerships that allow your mobile meal service and delivery program to support and enhance existing programming within the community. If an activity, enrichment or social service program is already in place, consider whether you can ‘piggy back’ on existing community outreach efforts to promote your programs jointly. This approach also works the other way around, where mobile meals precede other activities that begin operations in the same vicinity. Co-branding or co-location of services should be considered whenever two or more partners are targeting the same population.

Take Action to Secure Partnership

When seeking out resources or expertise to support your program, you owe it to potential partners to do your homework. Establish in advance both the nature and level of support that is required, and be prepared to share a working timeline for program operations that incorporates this request. You will also want to demonstrate the anticipated impact of these investments so that potential supporters understand how their actions will directly contribute to expanded service. Taken together, these elements will help move the conversation forward about how identified partners can best support your work.

The following are effective places to ‘pitch’ your program with a request for funding or other support:

- **Within your organization.** In the midst of planning for your program, establishing a budget, and identifying gaps in funding or resources, take time to engage superintendents, program directors, and department heads directly about additional funding or support to ensure successful program operations. These individuals know your work best and may have ideas on leveraging institutional resources to support your program.
- **Existing partners.** It is often easiest to secure support from individuals and organizations with whom you have collaborated in the past. If you have an existing, positive working relationship with a food service vendor, community partner, or grant-making organization, these contacts may be willing to expand their engagement to include support for your summer meals program.
- **Food policy councils or other collaborative working groups.** In many communities, food policy councils meet regularly to address issues related to food systems and food security across a city, region or state. These councils bring together a range of players who may include government agencies, nonprofits, clergy, food banks, school districts and elected officials. Seek out opportunities to share information about your program during these gatherings and identify which partners may have resources to support your work. Utilize opportunities to learn where groups of children gather during the summer to assist in determining mobile meal site locations.

In addition to expanded funding and partnership, talking about and ‘selling’ your program is a great way to raise awareness about your work among community leaders. This heightened awareness becomes increasingly valuable as you move forward with program planning and outreach and prepare to bring your mobile meals program into operation within the community.

Determine Your Service Area

Select Locations for Service

At the same time that your team is beginning to build a program budget and secure community partners, you will also need to carefully evaluate and select site locations to be served through your mobile program. This step of the planning process is about determining where mobile meal service is preferable to service at fixed sites, while also assessing the overall feasibility of service at a given location.

Proposed mobile meal site locations should meet the following four criteria:

- **Eligibility:** To operate an open site, the surrounding community must be deemed low-income through an area eligibility determination based on school free and reduced price meal enrollment or census tract data.
- **Need:** Proposed meal site locations should target communities that are underserved. New sites should not target children already receiving meals at other locations.
- **Opportunity:** The proposed meal site location should provide ease of access to children and families. This could mean the location is walkable, complements enrichment programming that is already in place, is convenient to a transit line, or is co-located with social services provided to your target audience.
- **Density:** Ideally, the site location should be in an area with a sufficient number and density of children so that federal reimbursement dollars for meals served significantly offset costs associated with program operations. There may be instances where a site is created to serve only a few children: the net revenue generated for overall program operations should remain positive.

To determine if a community meets these criteria, consider the following data sources:

- **Eligibility:** Schools can provide information about the percentage and number of low-income students who qualify for free and reduced price school meals; many state agencies also provide this information on their websites. To explore area eligibility using census tract data, use the [No Kid Hungry Averaged Eligibility Map](#).
- **Need:** The USDA [Capacity Builder](#) provides historical information about the location of summer meals sites during previous years. By taking this information and layering on information about the area eligibility status of given communities, it is possible to identify locations where program expansion may be appropriate.
- **Opportunity:** In addition to leveraging information about area eligibility, density, and meal site coverage, it is vital to consult with the [administering state agency](#) and community partners to gather on-the-ground information to inform program development and expansion efforts. This 'human intelligence' provides vital context that may otherwise be difficult and time-consuming to gather.
- **Density:** [Interactive GIS mapping](#) provides easy access to information about general population density by census tract. To go one step further, the USDA [Capacity Builder](#) includes a data layer that provides information on the number of free and reduced price eligible children in a given census block group.

Pro Tip: Rural Meal Delivery and Service

Many mobile meal service and delivery programs ‘cluster’ meal delivery sites close to one another to minimize driving time and maximize the number of children served. In rural communities, these dense concentrations may not exist because children are more dispersed across a wide geographic area, so the process to select meal site locations may be slightly different. Selection will likely be based less on where there is a high density of children and more on where enrichment programming and/or meal service facilities (picnic table, pavilion, community room, etc.) are already in place.

Site Location: Additional Considerations

As you move toward final selection of meal site locations for mobile service and delivery, the following considerations are especially helpful to determine the most effective and efficient allocation of resources:

- **Will site operation minimize risk due to vehicular traffic or illegal activity?** Observe the location during the hours when you plan to operate and speak with community leaders and local police officers to identify the best location and timing for meal service. Ask for police presence during meal service if needed.
- **Can children comfortably consume meals in a congregate setting?** Look for large common areas, especially if those with features like picnic tables, pavilions, and playground equipment. It is also important to speak with community members to make sure these facilities are available for use.
- **Are children already present in the vicinity?** Begin by exploring local apartment complexes and other housing areas where children and families are present. Research commissioned by No Kid Hungry shows that most low-income children (80%) are at their homes during the summer, and even more (86%) eat lunch at home most days. Use these insights to your advantage!
- **Are you serving meals at the right time?** Engage parents and community members to identify the best time to serve breakfast and/or lunch. This may be significantly later in the day than is the case during the school year. In addition, if there are nearby activities where many children are engaged during part of the day, you may want to determine if meals are already being provided at those locations. If not, you will likely want to serve meals immediately beforehand or afterward to maximize participation in your program.
- **Will parents trust the site?** Research shows that parents tend to trust places they already know (i.e. schools, churches, community centers, and the building where they live), so consider whether your meal service will benefit from association with these institutions through direct partnership or on-site service.
- **Are there local champions who can promote the program from within the community?** Utilize contacts in the community, such as the local property manager, to identify community members (such as parents or grandparents) with the passion and energy necessary to fill this role. If possible, engage the same persons each day to provide meals. Children and adults feel more comfortable with people they have come to know.
- **Is there a specific area at the meal site where the mobile delivery/service vehicle is easily visible?** Be sure to solicit regular feedback from children and families on this item in order to take advantage of opportunities for greater exposure that may not otherwise be readily apparent.

A best practice for selecting sites is to focus on low-income areas where the need is greatest, even if there is a lower concentration of children. In those areas, there may be less of a social stigma for kids to participate compared to mixed-income communities. Sponsors have also noted that participation in summer meals tends to

be 'hyper local,' meaning there may be unique social or cultural norms within each area that affect participation. Maximize the likelihood of success by engaging community members to understand their needs and desires and incorporating these insights into program design and implementation.

Finalize and Receive Approval for Site Operations

Once target site locations have been identified according to the criteria outlined above, the next step is to incorporate these site locations into your overall [sponsor agreement](#) with the state agency. Depending on when mobile meal site locations are finalized, this information may be included in your original sponsor application or added later when meal service dates and times for the location are finalized. Please note that while sponsor applications are subject to state or federal deadlines, additional sites may be added throughout the summer.

Next Steps

Now that you have secured key community partnerships and selected meal site locations, the next step is to chart out logistics for meal service and delivery that incorporate established best practices and are adapted to your organization and community. Please consult the [Meal Service Logistics and Best Practices](#) section of the [Mobile Meals Toolkit](#) for guidance in this area.