



Successful Non-Congregate Meal Service Models for Rural Areas: Implementation Guide

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) sponsors can operate non-congregate programs in rural communities without access to a congregate meal site. For more information, check out No Kid Hungry's [USDA Interim Final Rule Summary: Non-Congregate Summer Meals in Rural Areas](#) along with the following USDA guidance:

- [Q&A #2: Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#)
- [Q&A #3: USDA Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#)
- [Offering Multiple Meals as Part of the Non-Congregate Meal Service](#)

This guide to find strategies and tactics to execute a successful non-congregate summer meals program in your rural community.

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Definitions

- **Congregate meal service:** Meals must be consumed in a supervised setting at the site location. Note: children may take one fruit, vegetable, or grain item off-site for later consumption.
- **Non-congregate meal service:** Meals are served to either children or caregivers on behalf of their child and can be delivered directly or taken away from the distribution location for off-site consumption.
- **Rural:** Non-congregate service is only available in areas that meet the definition of rural. The current definition incorporates multiple data sources. For more information see USDA [policy memo SFSP 04-2024, SP 06-2024](#). The [USDA Rural Designation Map](#) indicates rural areas as shaded green. Unshaded indicates a non-rural area. In addition, sponsors and states may still seek approval for additional “rural pockets” that do not automatically qualify based on the core definition and map.
- **Access to a congregate site:** Defined by state agencies. As guided by USDA, state agencies should consider information including but not limited to any physical conditions or other barriers; limited capacity of a congregate site that prevents it from serving the community at large; sites serving the same children on different days, different weeks, or for different meals on the same day; and sites appealing to specific age groups or to children with unique dietary requirements.
- **Eligible individuals:** Individuals eligible to receive free summer meals include children and teenagers aged 18 and younger. Individuals aged 19 years and older who are enrolled in school programs for persons with disabilities may also receive free summer meals. *Note: In this resource, the term “children” will be used to broadly refer to all individuals eligible for free summer meals.*



Considerations for Non-Congregate Meal Service

For all non-congregate meal service models:

- Sponsors of both the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) that are in good standing are eligible to operate non-congregate meal service.
- Non-congregate meal service can only be used in locations that are considered rural and without access to a congregate site. See definitions on the previous page.
- No Kid Hungry has a [summer mapping tool](#) which can aid sponsors in identifying site locations that considered area eligible for summer meals and/or designated as “rural”.
- Up to two meals, or one meal and one snack, per child, per day may be offered (in any combination except lunch and supper). *Please reference USDA’s guidance: [Offering Multiple Meals as Part of Summer Non-Congregate Meal Service](#)*
 - With state agency approval, sponsors can distribute unitized meals for up to 10 calendar days at one time.
 - With state agency approval, sponsors can distribute meals composed of bulk food items or that include bulk items (like half gallons of milk) for up to 5 calendar days at a time.
- Sponsors can utilize both congregate and non-congregate meal service models.
 - For example, sites in eligible communities can serve congregate meals Monday through Friday and send home non-congregate meals for Saturday through Sunday. Or, if a program only offers an in-person lunch service, children can consume lunch on-site and take home a breakfast for the following day.
 - Sites may be able to serve both congregate and non-congregate meals if they are providing meals to separate groups and can ensure there is no duplication. Congregate and non-congregate meals cannot be served at one site at the same time.
- Meal service times must be established and approved by your state agency. Approved pick-up schedules or delivery plans may meet this requirement.
 - Unlike congregate meal service, sponsors operating non-congregate sites are not required to serve breakfast in the morning or allow one hour between the end of one meal service and the start of the next.
- Meals may be distributed to parents or guardians to take home to children using a process to ensure eligibility of children and avoid duplication.

Meal Distribution Models

Choose a model or mix of models that work best for your sites, staff, and community.

Drive-thru or curbside pick-up

In drive-thru or curbside pick-up models, the majority of families arrive by car to receive meals. Families drive up to the pick-up spot, and the meals are loaded into their cars outside. This model is best for meal programs planning to distribute multiple meals at one time. It also is ideal for communities with one or multiple easily accessible, central locations where meal distribution can take place. Multi-day meal packs result in a larger quantity of food leading to heavy boxes or bags, and a drive thru or curbside model accommodates the large quantity of food.

Things to consider:

- Caregivers or families may stay in their vehicles while receiving meals. Some families may prefer this to remain more anonymous.
- Establish a distribution point that allows for a line of waiting vehicles without backing up onto the street.
- Think about weather conditions. Consider purchasing a tent and other inclement weather gear for your staff.
- Sites should use clear signage – in multiple languages, as applicable – to advertise the availability of free summer meals.
- Offer a separate line for families that walked to the site or used public transportation. Consider offering smaller bundles of meals or loaning grocery carts for the summer.

Walk-up distribution

In this model, meals are available for pick-up at one or multiple central locations. Locations can be indoor or outdoor. Individual meals or multi-day meal packs are provided to children or caregivers on behalf of their children with this grab and go model. Walk-up distributions are ideal for communities with central locations that are easily accessible by public transportation, car, or walking. It is also ideal when fewer meals are provided at one time to accommodate those walking or taking public transportation.

Things to consider:

- If offering multi-day meal packs, consider offering smaller bundles or lending grocery carts to families walking or using public transportation.
- Remember to think about weather conditions. Consider purchasing a tent and other inclement weather gear for your staff. Or, provide your meal service indoors.
- If sites are indoors, be sure to clearly identify where people should go to receive the meals. Outdoor sites should also use clear signage to advertise the availability of free summer meals.

Meal Distribution Models (cont.)

Mobile route distribution

In mobile, non-congregate models, sponsors use a vehicle to travel to multiple site locations. Similar to congregate mobile models, non-congregate mobile routes are ideal in rural areas where families face transportation difficulties. Sponsors utilizing non-congregate mobile routes may be able to add more site locations to routes because vehicles do not need to wait for meals to be consumed.

Things to consider:

- This model works well for individual meals and multi-day meal packs.
- For schools, consider utilizing a known schedule for bus routes to identify stop locations and optimal routes.
- Select accessible locations near where families live, like parks, housing communities and apartment complexes.
- Apps and websites like [Here Comes the Bus](#) and [Where's the Bus](#) can be used by families to track where the bus or vehicle is along the meal service route. This prevents families from missing meal distributions if the vehicle is running early or late.

Direct home delivery

Direct home delivery works best for multi-day meal distributions by saving sponsors time and resources necessary for individual deliveries to families' homes.

Things to consider:

- Mail, delivery service, or hand-delivery is allowed in this model.
- Home delivery requires signed consent from the parent or caregiver.
- Sponsors must confirm the household's current contact information and identify the correct number of children in each household.
- All students within an area-eligible service area are eligible to receive home-delivered meals and may be invited to participate. If the service area includes non-area eligible locations, then the student must be determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals in order to receive home-delivered summer meals.
- Both school food authorities (SFAs) and community-based sponsors may do delivery.
 - Community-based sponsors *may* enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with an SFA to use the school's student data to identify and invite eligible students to receive home delivered meals, but this is not required.
 - The regulations outline a process for community-based sponsors to obtain eligibility information if operating outside of area eligible locations.
- With approval, meals for multiple days may be delivered at one time once the number of eligible children in the house has been verified and daily maximums are kept (i.e. no more than one breakfast and one lunch per child per day).

Meal Distribution Logistics

Regardless of model, consider the **equipment or supplies** needed for success.

- Outdoor sites:
 - Shade via pop-up tents or other shelters
 - Rain gear
 - Access to restrooms (for curbside and walk-up models)
 - Indoor option for inclement weather
- Meal transport:
 - Vehicle with hot and/or cold storage (if necessary)
 - Carts or rolling racks
- Meal storage:
 - Adequate refrigerator and/or freezer space
 - Coolers, thermal bags, and Cambros to maintain food temperature
 - Tip: If dealing with limited storage capacity, put only the items that need to be kept cold or hot in the cooler bags or Cambros. Keep the rest at room temperature and then unitize as needed for service.
 - Large plastic totes or milk crates to store meals or meal components
 - Thermometers

Consider the **staffing needs** for your distribution model.

- If low on staff, recruit volunteers or staff outside of your department to support meal distribution and help manage traffic.
- High school and college students are often looking for summer work opportunities or volunteer hours. Hiring young adults may also make your site more approachable to children and teenagers.
- Check out these staffing resources from No Kid Hungry to learn more!
 - [Hiring & Retaining Staff: Your Most Precious Commodity \(webinar recording\)](#)
 - [Staffing Up: Strategies For Working Through Labor Shortage Challenges](#)
 - [Tips For Staffing Summer Meals Programs](#)
 - [Benefits of Hiring Student Workers in Summer Non-Congregate Programs](#)

Meal Distribution Logistics (cont.)

Be strategic with **meal service times** and the **number of meals provided**.

- If permitted by your state agency, distribute meals for more than one day at one time to ease transportation barriers families may face.
- If this requires too much storage or staff capacity, have different pick-up or delivery days for different areas or locations served by the same central kitchen.
- Meet the needs of children with working caregivers who are unable to come during narrow timeframes during the day. If permitted, offer extended hours on certain days or an evening pick-up time rather than just an hour or two around midday.
- Allowing families to pre-order can help you be more accurate with meal prep. Consider a designated time for families to pick up online orders before the time promoted to the general public.

Communication

Ensuring the community knows about your program is critical to reaching children and teens with nutritious summer meals.

- Post clear and up-to-date information on your website. Include information like:
 - Time and location
 - How many meals will be distributed at once
 - The menu
 - Guidance on allergies and special dietary needs
 - Your organization's contact information
 - Whether children need to be present, or if a child does not need to be present, what information or documentation is requested to verify that the adult is the parent or guardian of an eligible child
- Consider using text message or robocall services to reach families.
- Use social media to promote the availability of meals and share updates. Consider paid advertising to target and expand promotion.
- Provide information to the local news media or radio stations to help promote the availability of meals and sources of information for details and updates.
- Post clear signage and information at sites to help children and families locate the exact place and procedures for meal pick-up.
 - Consider large banners or signs to direct people to open sites.
 - As needed, post multiple signs with arrows directing vehicles and families to the right location, or use sidewalk chalk or tape for sites with walk-up distribution.

Download and customize social media graphics, template letters to families, banners, flyers, and more with No Kid Hungry's [Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#).

Partnerships and Additional Services

Partnerships can help expand and enhance your summer meals program by offering programming and additional services. Even though children do not have to consume their meals at the meal site, you can still offer enhancements to attract participation.

- Libraries may offer their traveling bookmobile or donate books for children and teenagers participating in the meal program.
- High school students or undergraduate students may be interested in volunteering or in internship/job opportunities with your organization. They can help serve meals and play with kids during the meal distribution.
- Provide fun activities for children and families with your meal distribution. Small things like sidewalk chalk, stickers, or crayons and coloring books can go a long way to make meals more fun.
- Reach out to nutrition education providers like your local SNAP-Ed agency to see if they would be interested in providing services at the site or resources in the meal bags or boxes.
- Health centers and physicians' offices can offer free health screenings or support applying for Medicaid and community health programs.
- Organizations that provide Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application assistance can offer their services alongside meal distribution.
- Work with a food bank or pantry to distribute groceries or other household supplies to caregivers and families during the same time that meals are being distributed.
- Families can visit NoKidHungry.org/help or call 1-866-3-HUNGRY for English or visit NoKidHungry.org/ayuda or call 1-866-3-HUNGRY (English) or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (Spanish) to find free summer meals nearby.

Don't forget to share this resource with a friend or coworker!

