

Rural Non-congregate Summer Meals: How to Enhance the Program for Families

RESOURCE FOR STATE AGENCIES — FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2025 NO KID HUNGRY CAREGIVER SURVEY

METHODOLOGY

In December 2025 and January 2026, No Kid Hungry surveyed 1,248 caregivers living near open rural non-congregate summer meals sites, including 654 families who participated in 2025 and 594 families who did not. The survey was available in English and Spanish, and results are weighted to represent households near these sites nationally. The findings below highlight opportunities for states to make rural non-congregate summer meals more accessible and responsive to families' needs.



KEY INSIGHTS

1. START OUTREACH EARLIER

What families told us:

29% of eligible families who under-participated¹ said they learned about the program too late in the summer. **68%** of non-participants never heard about the program at all.

What states can do:

- Provide earlier, more predictable program approvals so sponsors can begin outreach before summer.
- Encourage spring and end-of-school outreach as a best practice, including backpack flyers, school communications, and site finder promotion in May.
- Share proven outreach strategies with sponsors through guidance and technical assistance.

Learn more: [No Kid Hungry Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#)



2. MAKE IT EASIER FOR CAREGIVERS TO PICK UP MEALS

What families told us:

20% of under-participating households named the requirement that children be present at pickup as a barrier to participation.

What states can do:

- Where guidance allows, consider alternative integrity measures, such as program registration or site caps, to prevent duplicate meals without requiring a child to be present at every pickup.



3. ENCOURAGE SPONSORS TO SERVE MORE PRODUCE, BREAD, AND MILK IN BULK

What families told us:

41% of families said more fresh produce would improve their experience a lot, making it the most-requested improvement. **70%** of likely 2026 participants said they would prefer ingredients to prepare at home over prepared meals.

What states can do:

- Allow and encourage sponsors to offer more produce, bread, and milk in bulk where permitted.
- Provide guidance on preparation instructions, packaging, and program integrity requirements.
- Share examples from sponsors successfully using bulk distribution models.

4. EXPAND HOME DELIVERY AND MOBILE DISTRIBUTION

What families told us:

45% of non-participating households who were open to participating in future summers preferred home delivery. Among under-participating households that had difficulty reaching a site, transportation was also a barrier to participation.

What states can do:

- Clearly define which home delivery and mobile distribution models are allowable.
- Clarify whether sponsors may operate delivery in-house or contract with a third party.
- Provide technical assistance and peer examples from sponsors already operating delivery routes.

5. PROMOTE MULTI-DAY DISTRIBUTION AS A BEST PRACTICE

What families told us:

27% of under-participating households said schedule conflicts kept them from using the program as much as they needed. **34%** said meals that were easy to carry and take home would improve their experience a lot.

What states can do:

- Highlight multi-day distribution as a strategy for reducing the number of trips families need to make to a site. Pair this guidance with attention to packaging so families, including those who walk to the site, can comfortably carry meals home.



6. PARTNER WITH TRUSTED LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS TO BUILD AWARENESS

What families told us:

Among families who knew about the program but did not use it, **41%** believed other families needed the meals more, while **23%** were unsure whether they were eligible. Among participating households, **32%** said they joined because family or friends spoke positively about the program.

What states can do:

- Trusted community partners can help families recognize that the program is available to them and understand how to participate.
- Partner with county, municipal, and community organizations to increase awareness.
- Equip trusted local messengers with consistent language about who can receive meals.
- Address common misconceptions that may cause families to rule themselves out before participating.

1 An under-participating family is one that indicated they did not participate as much as they wanted to in rural non-congregate throughout the summer (15% of all participants).