

February 4, 2004

Subject: Outreach Strategies

To: Regional Directors
Child Nutrition Directors
All Regions

We are always looking for new approaches that work to make the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and seamless summer waiver available and effective. We want to share with you strategies that have helped increase program awareness and participation in Kentucky. The strength of Kentucky's success in feeding children in the summer has been in mentoring, building partnerships, and formulating a message of community responsibility that everyone can embrace.

Here are eight suggestions that have had big results in Kentucky. They are easy to replicate. Could they work in some of your States?

1. Create a "map" of your state to help you focus your efforts.

Make a chart that includes a list of sponsors, their dates of operation, number of children they serve, number of children under age 19 enrolled in their area's school district, and percentage of children eligible for free and reduced price meals in their area schools. Give a copy of the chart to everyone you meet with to illustrate what areas are served, underserved, or unserved. It will help everyone to see where the needs are, and where more help is needed.

2. Find out where children go in the summer when school is out.

Contact all of those places—parks, day camps, pools, schools, recreation centers, playgrounds, libraries, churches, Boys and Girls Clubs, public housing projects, and other neighborhood sites where children congregate. Speak to the adults who are responsible for these sites about participating in SFSP. In Kentucky, staff has worked with organizations to provide food and activities to help children learn to read, and to keep them physically active. Staff actively reaches out to public housing authorities and to agencies that provide services to children in every county around the State.

3. Develop a message that resonates with community representatives.

Always talk about helping children in the community. Stress the trust you have that the community will take care of their children. Make sure people understand that you are not just meeting to tell them about summer feeding programs, but that you are there to ask for their support to help children. Encourage your partners to deliver the same message when they meet with local audiences. Kentucky's Department of Education's goal is to motivate county representatives to help feed the children in their communities.

4. Build partnerships.

Identify the types of program and service providers that are located in most communities in your State. Educate groups of civil servants, community leaders, anti-hunger advocates, and others who can take your message about SFSP to local audiences in corners of the State that you and your staff working alone would not be able to reach. Make it your goal to find partners –such as County Extension agencies, local Food Stamp offices, faith-based organizations, school food authorities America’s Second Harvest food banks, and anti-hunger community action agencies - who can help you provide SFSP information to every community in your State.

In Kentucky, county food stamp workers helped make sure that more SFSP sites were located in public housing projects. In a number of counties, senior citizen organizations became sponsors and used their kitchen facilities to prepare meals for children.

Every February, the State Education Commissioner, the Food Stamp Commissioner, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Lexington Field Officer in Charge sign a joint letter asking local office supervisors to help in the effort to increase SFSP participation. Contacts with AmeriCorps grantees, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and Family Resource Centers encouraged the creation of new local partnerships. The SFSP staff sets up meetings that bring sponsors and community partners together to work out their own local solutions for program expansion and outreach.

The collaborative effort between USDA and the Kentucky Department of Education is a model of partnership. The staff works easily –almost seamlessly –together on SFSP outreach. Whether they are coordinating their efforts or pursuing their own ideas, they always support each other, keep each other informed, and fill in for the other, if necessary.

5. Reach out to the largest audiences in your State.

Churches and other faith-based institutions can make a dramatic impact in feeding children during the summer because they have facilities to make a food service program work, and they are found in every community. In most neighborhoods, there are more churches than schools. Kentucky’s SFSP staff realized that they needed to reach out to church congregations, affiliated camps, vacation Bible schools, church supper organizers, and others, and explain how they would benefit by helping the children in their communities. The staff has contacted congregations, and the Council of churches has broadcast information about SFSP to their 6,000 affiliated churches.

6. Reach out to elected officials.

In 2002, Congressional and Senate office staff in Kentucky were invited to an outreach meeting to learn about SFSP. The staff were particularly interested in making sure children receive meals, that faith-based organizations are made aware of the program, that program information is easy to understand, and that children of service members have access to SFSP on military bases. The meeting led to numerous referrals, help in locating and establishing new SFSP sites, and to the posting of program information on a Congressional web site.

7. Foster mentoring of new and less experienced sponsors.

Match a new sponsor with a sponsor who is experienced, capable, and enthusiastic. Mentoring can help sponsors who are new, or have new directors, or have less successful programs. Mentors can answer their questions, share best practices, and troubleshoot problems. Whenever a potential new sponsor contacts the Kentucky Department of Education, staff immediately determines its eligibility, and gets enough information to match the organization with a sponsor mentor who has a good understanding of the program - a similar type of sponsor who knows how to complete the paperwork, how to get sites, how to plan meals, and how to keep administrative expenses down.

8. Give recognition.

Award certificates of appreciation to people who have helped and contributed to your efforts to increase participation in summer meal programs in your State. Let people know they have done a good job - a great job - that your State agency wants to acknowledge. Everyone loves to be appreciated, to feel that one can make a difference. Certificates of appreciation are awarded to partners from community organizations, county and State agencies, and others who have been instrumental in increasing SFSP participation in Kentucky. Sponsors are invited to the fall Commodities Meeting, where staff recognizes their ingenuity and successes. Sponsors receive awards, and explain how other programs can replicate them. Kentucky's SFSP staff believes that the recognition is also a good motivator for program participants, for their partners, and for themselves to do more next year!

Please share these suggestions with your State agencies. We would certainly like to hear about approaches that have worked in other States. If you have any comments that you would like to share on successful outreach efforts for feeding children in the summer, please contact Keith Churchill.

Original Signed

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