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Summer Meals for Children: An Overview of Federal Aid

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, the federal government has provided assistance for summer meals served to children. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides funding for meals served by nonprofit organizations, school districts, and public agencies to children during the summer. Another program, the Seamless Summer Option (SSO), allows school districts to operate a modified version of the school meals programs (the National School Lunch Program [NSLP] and School Breakfast Program [SBP]) into the summer.

Traditionally, summer meals must be consumed on-site with other participants (referred to as *congregate feeding*). In recent years, USDA has tested alternative food service models, including the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program for Children (SEBTC, or Summer EBT) and the Summer Meals-to-You demonstration projects.

The summer meal programs and demonstration projects are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

Summer Meals Programs

SFSP and SSO are authorized under Section 13 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. They provide federal reimbursement for meals served by participating institutions to children ages 18 and under during summer vacation periods in May through September (except for schools with continuous school calendars). They may also operate during unanticipated school closures between October and April. Federal funding is provided to state agencies, which oversee and distribute reimbursements to eligible institutions.

Eligible Institutions

In SFSP, eligible institutions (*sponsors*) include nonprofit organizations, school food authorities, and government agencies (including tribal governments).

In SSO, school food authorities (typically food service departments of school districts) that participate in NSLP and SBP during the school year are the only type of eligible sponsor. School food authorities have the option to participate in SFSP or SSO (or neither). School food authorities may find SSO easier to administer, but they receive larger reimbursements under SFSP.

In both programs, sponsors operate meal sites at various locations, including schools, recreation centers, and parks.

Eligible Sites

Eligibility rules differ for different types of meal sites. The most common types of meal sites are open sites, closed sites, and camps.

- **Open sites** (open to any child in the community) must be located in an area in which at least 50% of *area* children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. They serve free meals to all children and receive reimbursement for all meals served.
- **Closed sites** (open only to enrolled children) must demonstrate, through household applications, that at least 50% of *enrolled* children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. They serve free meals to all enrolled children and receive reimbursement for all meals served.
- **Camps** (residential and day camps that provide organized programs for enrolled children) do not need to have a certain proportion of free/reduced-price eligible children. Instead, they administer household applications and are only required to serve free meals to children who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and they receive reimbursement only for such meals.

Reimbursement

Both SFSP and SSO provide cash reimbursements for up to two meals (or one meal and one snack) per child daily, with exceptions for camps and sites serving migrant children, which may serve up to three meals (or two meals and one snack) per child daily. Sponsors may use reimbursements for allowable operational and administrative expenses.

In order to receive reimbursement, SFSP meals must meet SFSP nutritional requirements and SSO meals must meet NSLP/SBP nutritional requirements.

Table 1. Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Participation and Expenditures, FY2010-FY2019

Fiscal Year	Meal Sites (thousands)	Meals Served (millions)	Expenditure (\$ in millions)
2010	38.5	133.7	358.8
2011	38.9	137.3	372.9
2012	39.8	143.7	398.0
2013	42.7	150.9	427.2
2014	45.4	160.5	465.6
2015	47.7	163.4	487.8
2016	48.2	154.2	477.4
2017	50.1	152.2	482.7
2018	49.5	145.8	473.4
2019	47.5	142.1	476.4

Source: CRS, using USDA FNS, “Child Nutrition Tables,” July 10, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.

Notes: Seamless Summer Option (SSO) data are not available.

Summer Meal Demonstrations

Over the past decade, USDA has tested alternative models to congregate feeding in summer meals programs. Current demonstration projects include the Summer EBT demonstration, the Summer Meals-to-You demonstration, and the demonstration project for sites experiencing excessive heat. Summer meal demonstration projects were originally authorized by the 2010 agriculture appropriations act (§749(g) of P.L. 111-80) and have received subsequent funding in appropriations acts; most recently (as of the date of this In Focus), \$35 million was provided by the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94).

Summer EBT

The Summer EBT demonstration has operated each summer since 2011 in selected states and tribal organizations. The project provides an EBT card (loaded with \$30 or \$60 per child monthly) to households with children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Summer EBT relies on the infrastructure of two other federal nutrition assistance programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Participants in jurisdictions participating in the Summer EBT SNAP model can redeem benefits for SNAP-eligible foods at any SNAP-authorized retailer, while participants under the WIC model are limited to a smaller set of WIC-eligible foods at WIC-authorized retailers.

In FY2019, FNS announced a new process for determining Summer EBT grant recipients. Four jurisdictions were awarded funds: the Chickasaw Nation and Michigan (prior grantees) were funded for summers 2019-2021, and Wisconsin and the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona (new grantees) were funded for summers 2020-2022.

Summer Meals-to-You

USDA launched the Summer Meals-to-You demonstration in summer 2019 in Texas. The project, administered through a partnership with Baylor University's Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, delivers food boxes to children in rural communities. The project is scheduled to run each summer through 2021, and as of summer 2020, includes New Mexico.

The Summer Meals-to-You demonstration became a model for the Emergency Meals to You program (which is not a summer-specific program), launched by USDA in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sites Experiencing Excessive Heat

Each summer since 2015, USDA has provided exemptions from the congregate feeding requirement for SFSP and SSO meal sites experiencing excessive heat. Exempted sites must continue to serve children in congregate settings on days when heat is not excessive, and provide meals in another form (e.g., take-home) on days of excessive heat. USDA has also offered exemptions on a case-by-case basis for extreme weather and other exceptional circumstances.

Funding

Funding for SFSP and SSO is open-ended, mandatory appropriated funding. Funding is provided as reimbursements that are calculated based on the number of meals served. Statute includes a per-meal reimbursement rate that is adjusted annually for inflation (a maximum rate of \$3.75 per lunch in SSO and \$4.15 per lunch/supper in SFSP in 2020). Because statute guarantees reimbursement but does not provide funding directly, it requires an appropriation. In FY2020, P.L. 116-94 provided \$526 million for SFSP reimbursements, considering USDA's forecast of summer 2020 needs. SSO data are not available.

A smaller amount of mandatory appropriated funding is provided for USDA-purchased foods and state administrative costs. Funding for summer meal demonstrations is discretionary.

Recent Developments

Federal Studies

In 2018, GAO published a study of SFSP that found challenges with availability and awareness of meal sites, including a lack of sites in rural areas, and issues with state agencies' and local organizations' capacities to operate the program. The USDA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) also published an audit in 2018 that found that USDA had waived certain SFSP requirements without the proper legal authority. USDA subsequently revoked the waivers.

Proposed Rulemaking

On January 23, 2020, FNS published a proposed rule (85 *Federal Register* 4064) that would make changes to certain program requirements in SFSP. Some of the changes in the proposed rule would reinstate policies that USDA rescinded following the 2018 OIG audit. For example, the proposed rule would allow closed sites to use area data to establish their eligibility for SFSP (like open sites). A final rule has not yet been published (as of the date of this In Focus).

Summer Meals During COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many school districts transitioned from operating the school meal programs to the summer meal programs, which are allowed to operate during unanticipated school closures. USDA also waived certain SFSP and SSO requirements during the pandemic, partially using waiver authorities provided by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (P.L. 116-127). For example, USDA waived congregate feeding rules, nutritional requirements, and area eligibility rules for open sites—enabling sites in any area to serve free meals. In addition, the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136) provided an \$8.8 billion emergency supplemental appropriation for child nutrition programs, including summer meal programs.

More Information

Further information on the summer meal programs can be found in CRS Report R46234, *School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding*.

Kara Clifford Billings, Analyst in Social Policy

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