

## Issue Brief

# Cities Can Reduce Childhood Hunger Through Federal Meal Programs

Food insecurity can have wide-ranging and devastating long-term effects on children, threatening not only their health but also their ability to perform in school. Children who come to school hungry tend to do more poorly in school than their food-secure classmates. Poor educational outcomes contribute to other local problems, including unemployment, lower household incomes and increased crime.

The federal Afterschool and Summer Meal Programs fill a critical void for cities, giving low-income children access to nutritious meals during the hours they are not in school, including after school, during the summer and on weekends and holidays.

Currently, over 21 million children receive free and reduced-price meals through the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Programs (NSLP). However, summer meals currently reach only about 15 percent of children eligible for the NSLP nationally. Many low-income children that rely on these meals during the school year go hungry during the summer months and after school hours.

To help fill this gap, the U.S. Department of Agriculture provides federally funded meals through the Afterschool and Summer Meal Programs, including the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the NSLP Seamless Summer Option. Funding is guaranteed year-

to-year as part of a federal entitlement program, ensuring that the organizations operating these programs are fully reimbursed for the cost of the meals.

### Benefits to Cities of Federal Meal Programs

- ★ Reduced child hunger
- ★ Improved educational outcomes for children
- ★ Relief for working parents struggling to provide meals
- ★ Better attendance at enrichment activities
- ★ Additional resources for afterschool and summer programs and systems
- ★ Stronger local partnerships
- ★ More federal dollars flowing into the community

At the local level, the Afterschool and Summer Meal Programs have the potential to reduce child hunger and help children reach their full potential. They also play an important role in helping families that are not always able to afford three full meals a day keep their children from going hungry after the school day ends.

These programs are required to provide educational or enrichment activities in addition to meals in order to receive federal reimbursement. Many programs are operated by community organizations or city agencies that are already offering enrichment programs such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs or municipal parks and recreation departments. Meal programs have the potential to improve student nutrition and health outcomes, help keep children safe and engaged during non-school hours and improve their educational success. Out-of-school time meal programs can also reduce financial pressures on parents struggling to provide sufficient nutritious foods for their children.

Offering meals at existing afterschool and summer programs can serve to strengthen the capacity of those programs and the systems that connect them. Children are more likely to attend a program where they can receive a meal, and because they are not hungry, they are able to participate more fully in the activities provided. Strong community partnerships that have lasting positive impacts often develop as a result of these programs. For example, partnerships between city government, afterschool and summer meal program providers, school districts, community organizations, anti-hunger groups, local food

banks and other nonprofit organizations serve to strengthen communities, highlight the issue of child hunger in the community and streamline services for children in need.

## Opportunities for City Leadership

Mayors and other city leaders have important roles to play in ensuring that children in their communities have access to meals when they are out of school. Providing meals for children through federal meal programs is a win-win opportunity for cities. Cities benefit by bringing more federal funds into their neighborhoods, and can improve the health and well-being of low-income children by increasing their access to healthy meals and their participation in safe and engaging activities during the hours they are not in school.

It is crucial for city leaders to build strong partnerships with a range of stakeholders to implement meal programs in a way that maximizes quality and participation. Key stakeholders include statewide anti-hunger groups, schools, food banks and other community organizations. These important local resources can serve as site sponsors, meal vendors or program providers. They can also provide guidance on state and federal policies related to the meal programs, and serve as important outreach partners to help cities connect with families that they may not have access to through traditional channels.

**Here are ten key steps that city leaders can take to promote meal programs.**

### 1. Use the bully pulpit to raise awareness of child hunger and promote out-of-school time meal programs.

Mayors and other city leaders can be strong champions for reducing child hunger and expanding out-of-school time meal programs. They can write op-ed pieces for local newspapers, address the issue in public speeches or at events and promote information about meal programs on the city's website or through regular e-mail blasts, newsletters and social media.

Mayor Karl Dean of Nashville, Tenn., is a strong champion for reducing childhood hunger and increasing access to nutritious meals. He has been instrumental in expanding out-of-school time meal programs run by the local school district through his participation in press events, and by visiting meal program sites to help raise program visibility. By highlighting the meals available at Nashville After Zone Alliance (NAZA) sites, Mayor Dean helps promote the availability of afterschool opportunities and also makes families aware of the availability of free meals.

### 2. Host afterschool and summer meals kick-off events.

Kick-off events are an ideal way to raise awareness about meal programs in a way that brings key stakeholders and families together. Mayors can promote meal programs at kick-off events, and frame the issue as a top priority for the city before a large audience of community leaders. Such events draw attention to these programs and help build momentum as

sponsors transition between afterschool and summer meal programs.

To launch its Fun Safe Philly Summer campaign in 2014, Philadelphia hosted a field day for youth with events such as kickball, tug of war and dodgeball, in addition to providing free healthy snacks. Mayor Michael Nutter kicked off the campaign with a press event, which included remarks from the mayor, meal program providers and staff from the Food and Nutrition Service office within the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### 3. Sponsor Afterschool or Summer Meal Programs.

City agencies, such as parks and recreation or departments of housing, are well suited to act as sponsors for afterschool and summer meal programming and to host meal sites at their existing recreation centers and pool sites. City staff are integral to the success of these programs – they often know where young people congregate after school or during the summer, and their working relationships with key community partners are essential.

Houston's Parks and Recreation Department has sponsored the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) at over 400 sites, and the Afterschool Meal Program at 48 community centers. The department also provides meals that are served at other locations, including apartment complexes, churches, learning centers and nonprofit organizations.

#### 4. Partner with community organizations that serve afterschool and summer meals.

Local nonprofit organizations and other afterschool program providers often act as sponsors to provide afterschool and summer meals as well as activities for children before or after meals. Cities can leverage funding for the meal programs in partnership with community-based organizations.

Seattle developed a unique partnership between the United Way of King County, the City of Seattle and its Parks and Recreation Department, Within Reach (a local nonprofit that connects residents to federal nutrition benefits), Public Health Seattle and King County. This long-term partnership provides healthy meals to children when they are out of school. As a result of this partnership, the city launched new meal sites, executed a multi-tiered outreach campaign and held a successful summer kick-off event that included Congressman Jim McDermott, players from the Seattle Seahawks, and representatives from Radio Disney, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (the state agency that oversees the meal programs).

#### 5. Establish a local child hunger working group or task force.

A mayor's office has the power to bring key partners together around issues of importance to the city. Staff from a mayor's office can coordinate a working group or task force that focuses on the issue of child hunger and identifies strategies to reduce it, including

initiatives to increase participation in out-of-school meal programs. City agencies, meal program partners, food banks, local businesses, schools and other local and regional stakeholders can all contribute to these planning efforts.

In Fitchburg, Mass., Mayor Lisa Wong convened city officials (including staff from the police and fire departments), school leaders, community-based organizations and a representative from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Meal program vendors were also invited to these discussions, in which participants analyzed the existing locations of city parks, summer programs and low-income housing developments in relation to potential feeding site locations.

#### 6. Connect with the state agency administering child nutrition programs.

City leaders can convey their support for child nutrition programs to the state agency that administers the federal Afterschool and Summer Meal Programs. This municipal outreach allows for more clear communication between the state agency, sponsors and program providers, and it can help create a more streamlined application process for meal programs that significantly reduces the administrative burdens on sponsors and providers.

#### 7. Collaborate with school officials to combat child hunger.

Coordinating efforts with local public school districts can help build strong year-round feeding programs. School officials already

have a strong base of knowledge because they operate the school lunch program, making them valuable resources on the federal meal application process and training.

In Michigan, the Port Huron City Recreation Department collaborates with the Port Huron Area School District's Food Services Department to offer free summer lunches for children. Food is prepared by school district staff and delivered to recreation centers. The young people who participate in the free summer lunch program enjoy great relationships with city staff and the district's food services staff - connections that encourage students to set and achieve healthy eating goals.

#### 8. Incorporate child nutrition goals into a broader citywide agenda.

City leaders can work with staff responsible for broader citywide initiatives such as *Let's Move! Cities, Towns and Counties* or other initiatives that focus on children and youth to expand the reach and scope of child nutrition programming.

As part of *Let's Move! Cities, Towns and Counties* (LMCTC), the City of Fontana, Calif.'s Healthy Fontana Program partnered with the Fontana Unified School District (FUSD) and the Boys and Girls Club to provide children with access to healthy, free meals for their summer meal program. By aligning the city's summer meal program with LMCTC, the City of Fontana Community Services Department was able to capitalize on citywide marketing efforts to increase participation at the meal

sites. This connection also allowed the city to utilize LMCTC resources such as MyPlate educational materials and offer nutrition education and physical activity to both the parents and students at all 12 summer meal program locations that the city hosts.

#### 9. Publicize out-of-school time meals through a targeted marketing strategy.

Cities can make program site locations and operating hours easily accessible to families by utilizing existing national resources such as the National Hunger Hotline (1-866-3HUNGRY or [www.whyhunger.org/findfood](http://www.whyhunger.org/findfood)) to provide local information to people who are seeking help. Cities can also advertise information about meal sites on utility bills, through robo-calls, or through the city's 311 information line or the United Way's 211 information line.

The Healthy Communities Office in Providence, R.I., was established by former Mayor Angel Taveras to focus on healthy living policies and has developed a comprehensive marketing campaign. A summer meals kick-off event in early July 2014 included an array of printed materials, street light banners, posters, door hangers to be sent home with students and flags placed at the summer meal sites. In addition, the city is using local English and Spanish radio stations to inform parents about the location of meal sites.

## 10. Support the Community Eligibility Provision for low-income schools.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) simplifies the process by which schools that predominantly serve low-income children can provide free, nutritious school meals to students through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. City officials can encourage the school superintendent, chief business officer or other school stakeholders to opt into the CEP, thereby increasing the likelihood that children will receive healthy meals in school.

The Schenectady School District in New York has successfully implemented community eligibility district-wide with the help of the city, which garnered public support for the issue and provided assistance to the school. As a result of implementing CEP, the district is substantially improving attendance rates, helping combat food insecurity among students and addressing racial equity issues as part of a larger citywide equity agenda.

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## Resources

- Food Research and Action Center's School Breakfast, Afterschool and Summer Meal Program
  - <http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program/>
  - <http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/afterschool-programs/>
  - <http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/summer-programs/>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture's School Breakfast, Afterschool and Summer Meal Program
  - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/school-breakfast-program-sbp>
  - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/child-and-adult-care-food-program>
  - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program-sfsp>
- Economic Benefits of Summer Meals: Find specific information on state participation rates and how increases in participation can increase Federal financial support for your city.
  - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/get-involved/feeding-more-children-during-summer-months>
- National Hunger Hotline: Publicize the National Hunger Hotline in your community so that families utilize the hotline to easily find meal sites.
  - <http://www.whyhunger.org/findfood>

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## About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is dedicated to helping city leaders build better communities. NLC is a resource and advocate for 19,000 cities, towns and villages, representing more than 218 million Americans. NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families works with municipal leaders to improve outcomes for the children, youth and families in their communities.

## About the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the YEF Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers, and other local leaders play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

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[www.nlc.org/iyef](http://www.nlc.org/iyef)

