



Cities Reducing Child Hunger Through Communications Campaigns

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Introduction

Between 2012 and 2018, the National League of Cities (NLC), in partnership with the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) helped cities to reduce childhood hunger by increasing participation in federally funded summer and afterschool nutrition programs. During these six years, 71 participating cities provided over 12 million meals to more than 140,000 children.

In 2018, NLC expanded the focus of the initiative by encouraging cities to reduce hunger in their communities through mayor-led, citywide anti-hunger campaigns. NLC awarded six cities grants totaling \$750,000 and offered extensive technical assistance to help these cities utilize a broad range of city departments to address hunger, including those not typically responsible for this task.

The six cities included:

- Allentown, Pa.;
- Durham, N.C.;
- Jackson, Miss.;
- Little Rock, Ark.;
- Miami Gardens, Fla.; and
- Winston-Salem, N.C.

Mayors in these cities demonstrated a commitment to lead citywide anti-hunger campaigns, coupled with a willingness to strengthen and expand programs that bring federal nutrition dollars into cities, such as the Afterschool and Summer Nutrition Programs and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Much of the work done by these cities relied heavily on leveraging their existing communications and outreach tools to engage partners, build community

support, expand services and increase local participation in federal nutrition programming. They successfully used strong branding strategies coupled with earned media, partner/stakeholder outreach, and community outreach to build and grow their anti-hunger campaigns.

Each city undertook these efforts in different ways but found that their concerted local efforts helped increase support across stakeholders and the larger community along with an uptick in utilization of nutrition benefits and programs.

These six city campaigns led to an additional 12,000 youth accessing meals, almost 390,000 additional meals served in their communities, and more than 100 new partners engaged in the campaign efforts.

This brief outlines the ways these cities used their communications and outreach tools effectively and touches on the challenges they faced.

Strengthening Campaigns Through Strong Branding

All six cities recognized the importance of local branding. These cohesive branding efforts were designed to let residents know the food program comes from a known and trusted source, to build community support and increase recognition of services available. This type of branding was also designed to reduce the stigma of accessing public programs.

This branding was used ubiquitously around the cities, including buses, fleet vehicles, and billboards. It focused on creating a positive message about the efforts (i.e. focusing on healthy eating) that was also aimed at normalizing the nutrition programs that were available to everyone.



Each city's campaign had a name that was the central component to its branding:

- Healthy Kids Healthy Allentown – Allentown, Pa.;
- Feeding Durham's Champs – Durham, N.C.;
- Jackson Meals Matter – Jackson, Miss.;
- Be Mighty Little Rock – Little Rock, Ark.;
- Live Healthy Miami Gardens – Miami Gardens, Fla.;
- and
- Think Orange – Winston-Salem, N.C.

All six cities were successful in creating a unified brand around their anti-hunger efforts – both at reaching people who most needed the services and building community support. However, two cities pointed out that a balance had to be found between the concise and universal messages that were part of their branding and making sure the message that free meals were available was coming through loud and clear. City officials said residents were not sure exactly what the campaign's branding materials were for until they looked it up online on the city or partner websites.

Two of the cities went further to raise the visibility of their brands beyond their communities. As described in a later section of this brief, Winston-Salem was able to mobilize residents to show public support for the campaign through high school athletic games.

Little Rock, in partnership with the Arkansas Municipal League, adapted their branding for use by other cities in the state wishing to undertake similar efforts.

Earned Media Strategies

All six cities reported extensive local news media coverage of their campaigns across mediums including television, radio, and newspapers. Earned media coverage of a city initiative serves as validation by an independent, outside source. In most cities, local news media, regardless of format, is often held in high trust by residents.

All the cities rolled out their programs with press events, usually their mayors visiting a local afterschool meals site to announce the initiative. Officials in all the cities recognized that earned media on the rollouts would be easy given that they were led by the mayor and featured positive stories about the municipalities helping children. Holding the press events at locations where meals are served also had the bonus of creating great visuals of happy children that television news programs gravitate towards for positive, feel-good stories.

These initial rollouts were coordinated with the National League of Cities and each city's state municipal league, adding the backing and validation of a known national and state organization.

Allentown held its rollout at a local fire station, which increased its media appeal through images of firefighters feeding the children of their community. Allentown local officials decided to locate one of their new meal sites at a fire station in a neighborhood where data showed the program was most needed – adding an additional layer of community trust and stigma reduction.

Using data on federal nutrition program participation and resident demographic information, some cities realized that communities and populations that most needed the services had their own local trusted news media sources that were not the newspapers or television stations. In response to local data about program take-up, Little Rock, Miami Gardens and Winston-Salem did extensive outreach to black and Latinx radio stations, with public officials appearing on talk shows, morning drive programs, and regular news features.

Collaborating with Key Community Stakeholders

The six cities also leveraged their communications strengths to bring nontraditional partners in the anti-hunger arena into the campaigns and to build broad community stakeholder support. These city leaders felt that to succeed in building a citywide, comprehensive anti-hunger campaign they would need more than their traditional partners in the anti-hunger community, such as local and statewide anti-hunger organizations, K-12 public schools, YMCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs that normally serve as meal sites for the Afterschool and Summer Meal programs.

Allentown and Little Rock worked closely with their state municipal leagues to hold statewide convenings that allowed them to leverage municipal league resources to connect with potential partners and build stronger regional initiatives with nearby municipalities.

Winston-Salem Mayor Allen Joines publicized his meetings with local business groups, thereby securing public commitments from business leaders to support and publicize the work of their anti-hunger initiative. Bringing in the business communities garnered funding, in-kind contributions such as promotional items and expansion of meal sites.

Partnerships with local businesses also helped the cities legitimize the campaigns and further build community support for helping residents in need through anti-hunger initiatives.

All the cities gave their anti-hunger initiatives prominent visibility at local community events – such as farmer’s markets, health fairs, job fairs, etc.

The City of Winston-Salem’s Think Orange campaign used some creative approaches to garner community support. The local minor league baseball team took up the campaign’s charge and shared its support of the campaign in the local Fourth of July celebration, reaching large numbers of residents. Realizing that local high school football games are a huge community draw, the city got Hanesbrands Inc. to donate orange-colored socks to the campaign that were worn by 12 local high schools’ varsity football and volleyball teams during home games with their arch-rivals to show support. Lowes Foods then sold pairs of the socks that the community could wear to show their support of the Think Orange campaign (with proceeds from the sales going to support the anti-hunger initiative).

Community Outreach

All six cities used both traditional and non-traditional outreach methods and models to reach residents who were most in need of nutrition programs and made sure they were aware of the programs and could access them. Outreach included making sure families knew how to take their children to a meal site or how to sign up for SNAP benefits.

Traditional methods included advertising through public service announcements, billboards and buses, making sure materials were available in languages other than English, announcements at community events, targeted mailings to zip codes where data show the needs are greatest, social media and dedicated websites.

Even when using these traditional outreach methods, some of the cities leveraged their local youth councils to help get the message to “hard to reach” populations such as adolescents, for whom the stigma of utilizing a free meals program looms large. Local youth councils produced public service announcements and social media campaigns targeted at their peers.

Rather than just relying on these traditional outreach methods, the six cities engaged in targeted outreach using creative strategies. First and foremost, the cities used neighborhood demographic data to make sure that they were targeting the neighborhoods and communities that had the highest need.

Some cities did targeted door knocking and left doorknob hangers with specific information on where services can be obtained.

Little Rock included information about the campaign in residents’ water bills and aligned SNAP sign-up assistance with other public events that were convenient for parents and caregivers.

Miami Gardens added information about the program initiative and meal sites to its Parks and Recreation Department materials sent to all community members. The city also invested in a targeting texting service to reach out to families that were identified by local data to be eligible for SNAP benefits. City officials shared that many residents who responded to this outreach were grateful that they were able to get help applying for SNAP benefits in a way that they felt reduced the stigma of needing and utilizing social safety net benefits.

Conclusion

While the outreach and communications strategies detailed in this report are presented as distinct efforts, they were all facets of a coordinated campaign that built on each other. In some cities, newspaper coverage piqued the interest of local philanthropists who contacted the city to get involved. Local news media interest in one city brought to light a resident who had been providing meals for neighborhood children in need from her backyard for years. The city was able to connect with this local hero and get her registered as an authorized meal site, giving her access to federal and state resources. Cities that utilized black and Latinx radio outlets brought in partners from those local communities as well as an uptake in service utilization.

In the modern media and social landscapes, coordinated communications and outreach campaigns that leverage a city's strengths and incorporate nontraditional tactics and tools are necessary to build and sustain large-scale public initiatives that require partnerships, community support, and uptake to succeed. Key to the success of these cities' efforts was the use of data in the decision-making process.

While the focus of this brief was cities' efforts on behalf of their anti-hunger initiatives, these types of communications and outreach campaigns can be used to build and sustain similar initiatives that seek to garner broad community support.



Acknowledgments

Todd Allen Wilson, former NLC senior writer and Patrick Hain, program manager for economic opportunity and financial empowerment at NLC's Institute for Youth, Education and Families are the primary authors of this brief. NLC would like to thank Clarissa Hayes from the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) for her contributions to the brief, and the Arkansas Municipal League and the Pennsylvania Municipal League for their support.

This brief and NLC's efforts to reduce hunger are made possible with the generous support of the Walmart Foundation.

For more information about NLC's work on food access and anti-hunger campaigns, contact Patrick Hain at hain@nlc.org.

About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the nation's leading advocacy organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance. Through its membership and partnerships with state municipal leagues, NLC serves as a resource and advocate for more than 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans.

About the Institute for Youth, Education and Families

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families is the go-to place for city leaders seeking to improve outcomes for children and families. With expertise in early childhood success, education & expanded learning, promoting a culture of health, youth & young adult connections, and economic opportunity & financial empowerment, the YEF Institute reaches cities of all sizes and brings together local leaders to develop strategies via technical assistance projects, peer learning networks, leadership academies, and Mayors' Institutes.