

Nebraska Summer Food Service Program Best Practices Toolkit 2020



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More information and additional resources are available at neappleseed.org/summerfood

Introduction

Empty classrooms should not mean empty stomachs.

While school breakfast and lunch support kids during the school year, summer months can be harder for families to pull together healthy and consistent meals.

Communities across Nebraska come together to support healthy eating for kids age one to 18 each summer through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Over the three months when school is out, the SFSP offers free meals

to kids in high needs areas. This service is vital to Nebraska’s children and families, particularly those who utilize free and reduced-price school lunch and/or breakfast during the school year.

Nebraska Appleseed created this toolkit in partnership with Children’s Hospital of Omaha. Over 9 months, Appleseed staff surveyed, observed, and interviewed Nebraska SFSP sponsors, parents, and site leaders throughout the state. We hope the following best practices, nuggets of wisdom, and direct experiences from SFSP sponsors can contribute to growing the program in Nebraska for years to come.

“I had students excited about some of the meals I made. I loved seeing them smile.”

**- Caren Clark,
Cedar Bluffs
Public Schools**

Key Statistics

1 in 14

Nebraska kids who eat meals during summer also eat school lunch

272

Sites offering free meals to kids age one to 18 in Nebraska in 2019

881,063

Total meals served at Nebraska Summer Food Service Program sites in 2019

How the Summer Food Service Program Works



The SFSP supports healthy eating for kids during the summer. The program offers all kids age one to 18 a free meal in a location that is supervised, safe, and welcoming. Kids who eat at SFSP sites (henceforth known as “sites”) are better positioned to avoid summer learning loss, experience reduced food insecurity, and have stronger positive relationships with adults.

Organizations, camps, agencies, school districts, or other groups can be sponsors through the SFSP. Sponsors follow state and federal regulations and are financially and administratively responsible for running food service. Sponsors receive federal SFSP funds that support their programs and can manage one or more sites in qualified low-income areas where food is served.

NE Sponsors and “Open” Sites, Summer 2019

	Sponsors	Open Sites
School District	62	184
Nonprofit	6	9
Food Bank	2	54
Church-affiliated	4	7
Tribal Organization	1	1
TOTAL	75	255

Sponsors can host sites as “open,” or available to the community on a first come, served basis, or “closed,” meaning available to a certain set of enrolled students only. Open sites serve the vast majority of kids eating through the SFSP in Nebraska.

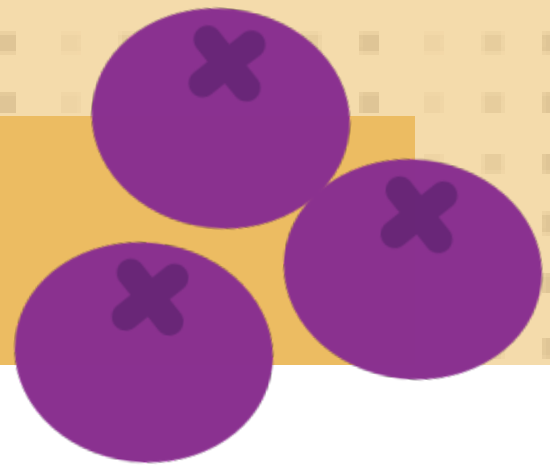
“I am proud that we are able to offer our community at least one or two meals to students that may not have much food in their homes.”

- Rowan Lang, Fremont Public Schools

SFSP Sites are Located in High Needs Areas

- Served by a school with 50% or more of the children eligible for reduced price or free meals
- Identified as eligible by census data by having 50% or more families in poverty
- At 185% of poverty or less for housing requirements – housing projects or rural development areas
- Sites that serve special populations of children:
 - Migrant
 - Homeless

The Need for Summer Meals



In 2017, Nebraska's SFSP program served fewer than 1 in 14 kids that ate school lunch during the school year. The national average is 1 in 7.

This fact is hard to swallow considering the need in Nebraska - nearly 1 in 7 kids in our state are food insecure; meaning they don't have enough consistent food to lead a healthy and active lifestyle. We know food insecurity isn't limited to just urban or rural areas but is found in all communities. It's just harder to see in some.

When school's out during the summer, families spend more on food. One study estimated that families can spend \$300 more per summer month due to the lack of school meals. In this way, serving meals through the SFSP is critical to meeting the needs of Nebraska families.

The consistent work of the Nebraska Department of Education and communities around the state has enabled enormous progress in Nebraska. Over 2 years, Nebraska went from 56 sponsors and 156 sites (2017) to 75 sponsors and 272 sites in 2019! That is amazing growth and excellent progress.

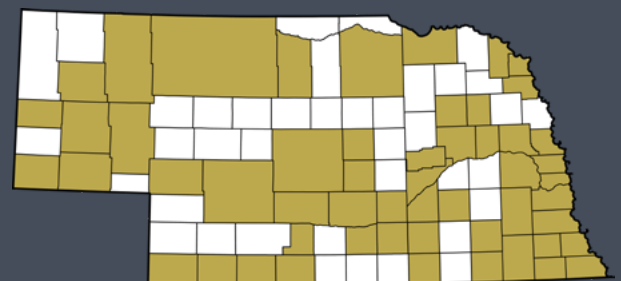
With over 20 school districts that are eligible but not participating in the SFSP program, we are hoping to see even more sponsors and sites in the coming years.

"Many kids come back from over long weekends and are hungry. They just eat like they haven't in months."

- Jane Rhine, Fairbury Public Schools

What About Your Community?

Check [USDA's Capacity Builder Map](#) to see your community's eligibility and past participation in the SFSP.



Counties with (green) and without (white) SFSP sites, 2019

Summer Food Service Program Best Practices



It's clear that SFSP sponsors care about feeding kids. By implementing more of the following best practices, recommended by Nebraska sponsors and national partners, sponsors can watch their hard work result in even more meals served.

Use these best practices in a way that works for you:

- Read them all or visit topics of interest.
- Tailor ideas to your needs and your community.
- Consult with your local site coordinators, teachers, parents or caregivers, and especially kids to get feedback on new ideas and to evaluate your existing program.
- Pilot, test, and revise often. Figuring out what works takes time!
- Contact us with more ideas or to share your experience!

SFSP BEST PRACTICES

1. Sites should **extend service** to include more days, more meals, or both (p.6)
2. Sites should offer **consistent outreach** that meets families where they are (p.8)
3. Sites should **design menus to attract** more kids (p.10)
4. Sites should make location and design **decisions with participation in mind** (p.12)
5. Sites should **host activities** (and make them healthy!) (p.15)

\$15,000 Nebraska Summer Food Service Equipment Grants

NDE Nutrition Services has grant funds available to assist new and existing SFSP sponsors with expenses for expanding and/or initiating SFSP services. Each applicant may apply for a maximum of \$15,000 per year. This is an amazing opportunity to grow or initiate a SFSP location so be innovative and try something new. The grant is open Jan. 21-Feb. 28, 2020.



SFSP BEST PRACTICE

1. Sites should extend service to include more days, more meals, or both

Statewide, Nebraska SFSP sponsors served more than twice the number of meals in June that they did in July. While summer school drives a lot of that participation, districts and organizations are allowed and should be serving the community in July and August.

NE SFSP Operating Month and Meals Served, Summer 2019

Month of Operation	Number of Sites	Percent of Sites	Meals Served
May	83	33%	28,949
June	250	98%	599,064
July	180	71%	233,829
August	73	29%	19,221
		TOTAL	881,063

Sponsors are able to serve up to 2 meals a day through the SFSP. Breakfast and lunch are the most common options, as seen below, but morning and afternoon snack and supper are options as well.

NE SFSP Sites Meal Service, Summer 2019

Meal	Number of Sites	Percent of Sites	Meals Served
Breakfast	165	65%	271,798
Lunch	246	96%	590,535
Afternoon Snack	8	3%	6,510
Supper	1	0.4%	12,220
		TOTAL	881,063

In the summer of 2019, 246 sites served lunch but far fewer served breakfast. As sponsors gain experience with the SFSP program, adding a second meal could benefit both your program and the kids attending your sites.

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

Extend Service

eliminating racism
empowering women
ywca

Location: Hastings, NE

Best Practice: Extending service in Hastings

The YWCA of Adams County has stepped up to be a “gap filler” for summer food. During the few weeks after Hastings Public Schools lets out and before they start their summer food program, the YWCA hosts programming and meals to support more kids eating. These few weeks of service have grown participation from 30-40 kids two years ago to 70-80 this past year.

Best Practice: serving “real” foods

Becca Woolsey, sponsor at YWCA of Adams County, believes in making the menu a part of a nutrition lesson with her program. By serving “real” food that is fresh, local, and high quality, she engages kids in taste tests that help them learn more about what they’re eating and how it made it onto their plates. Taste testing helps inform her menu decisions and this supports greater buy-in for students. Becca has definitely seen the changes to nutrition standards begin to expand the palates of her kids and they’re more open to trying new, healthy things because of it. Hummus and tzatziki were definite wins.



The flyer features a sun icon and a silhouette of a person running. The text is centered and includes the following information:

Summer
FREE LUNCH
For Kids & Teens

Summer Food Service Program
Open to anyone 18 years old and under
Hassel free- No paperwork, No questions

When: May 23rd–24th
May 28th–31st
July 29th–August 9th
Serving from 11 am- 12:30 pm
Monday-Friday

Where: YWCA Adams County -Great Room
Join us for FREE Home Cooked Meals, Games,
Crafts and More!

Logos at the bottom include: Hastings Public Schools, YWCA of Adams County, United Way, and the YWCA logo.

On Messaging:

“Everybody is equal, everybody is important. Come try it out!”

- Cindy Curtis, Sidney Public Schools

Awareness of the SFSP program is the most important part of building participation for a site. If families don't know about the program, or are confused by your materials, they cannot be expected to participate.

Outreach Checklist

- Online Presence**
 - Social Media
 - Website

- Media Outreach**
 - Newspaper
 - Radio
 - Local TV

- Posters / Flyers**
 - Sent home with youth
 - Posted around town

- Clear signage to and at the site**

- Robocalls and/or texts (through the local school)**

- Culturally appropriate outreach**
 - Multiple languages
 - Menu Options
 - Age Appropriate Options

- Special Events**
 - Kick off
 - Spike Event

- Community Presentations**

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

2. Sites should offer consistent outreach that meets families where they are

39 Nebraska sponsors responded to our SFSP Best Practices survey. Here are the most effective methods of advertising they shared:

Most Effective Advertising Method

Rank	Method	No. of Responses
1	Social Media	11
2	Facebook (specifically)	4
3	Flyers	5
4	Newspaper	3
5	Radio	3
6	School Newsletter	3
7	Word of Mouth	3
8	Signs	1
9	Website	1
10	TV	1

Bright Ideas from Nebraska Sponsors

- Reach out to **area daycares** to make sure they feel welcome attending the site. - *Paula Brandenburgh, Columbus Public Schools*
- Post what's for lunch everyday on social media. Use **pictures** if you can! - *Thersa Shearer, Arapahoe Public School*
- Send a **reminder postcard** to families about the program before meal service starts. If a grant is written, postcards are written in. - *Jane Rhine, Fairbury Public Schools*
- Order a **free USDA outreach kit and/or NDE summer outreach materials** for consistent branding. - *Nebraska Dept. of Education*
- When your summer program ends, **share info with kids about sites that remain open.** - *Jackie Cambridge, Westside Community Schools*
- Promote site locations through **the backpack program** during the school year. - *Sarah Comer, Food Bank for the Heartland, Omaha*
- High quality programs grow because people bring their friends! We can all strive for **word-of-mouth** advertising because it's *THE* most effective kind. - *Brenda Buchholz, Overton Public Schools*

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

Outreach and Advertising



SFSP BEST PRACTICE

3. Sites should design menus to attract more kids

50% of Nebraska sponsors agreed or strongly agreed that the menu was influential in keeping kids coming back.

The food served at your site has the power to fuel active and healthy kids but also a well-attended program. Successful programs across Nebraska shared these tips for creating menus that entice kids to keep coming back to summer meals sites.

Serve culturally appropriate, hot meals

Mary Kelsey in Winnebago serves culturally-appropriate buffalo meat sloppy joes to kids at her site. Tradition and history are infused into other parts of the menu as well. On occasion, kids get a traditional Native American dessert called *ouchapie* – a blueberry dessert with walnuts. Each day, Mary serves hot lunch for her kids because the kids like it more.



School-based sites can serve favorites from the school year menu

Deb Keasling from Harvard Public Schools, along with many others, shared that they base their summer menu on foods that are favorites of the students through the school year. Kids come back for their favorites!

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

Do taste testing with participants

Winnebago SFSP leadership shared that when they realized the kids weren't eating their whole, fresh apples served as part of the SFSP, they found a solution by putting apple cutters out in the cafeteria along with various dips. Peanut butter and yogurt were big winners and the kids really ate it up.

Also, see YWCA of Adams County [taste testing ideas on p. 7.](#)



Use 'special' service days to create buzz and bring in more kids

Brenda Bucholz in Overton encourages participation by making an event out of a community favorite. 2-3 times during a summer, participation at Overton's site goes from 80 to as many as 175 by hosting Chicken Fry-Days (Fridays). She makes sure to get the word out with flyers and postcards and the result is more kids showing up for a meal and being taught about the valuable resource the SFSP can be. They also get to enjoy a chicken fried steak!

Recipe Resources

- [USDA Team Nutrition Recipes](#)
- [Child Nutrition Recipe Box](#)
- [School Nutrition Association Recipes](#)

Menu Planning

June 2019				
Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
	4	5	6	7
pizza & mashed gravy.	Donut holes, sausage & fruit. Chicken nuggets, macaroni & cheese, green beans, peaches, dinner roll.	Omelet, English muffin & fruit. Super nachos, shredded lettuce, salsa, cheese sauce, strawberries.	Griddle sandwich & fruit. Ham & cheese sandwich, chips, mixed veggies, spiced pears.	Cer bar Ch bak pic
	11	12	13	14
rolls, fruit. y ies,	Breakfast wrap & fruit. Tacos, shredded lettuce, salsa, mixed fruit.	French toast sticks, ham & fruit. Spaghetti & meat sauce, green beans, pears, garlic toast.	Breakfast pizza & fruit. Pizza, salad mix, yogurt, strawberries.	

Rural State Challenges



Nebraska is a largely rural state and building participation can be a challenge for many SFSP sponsors. The USDA has created a resource with ideas specific to rural areas to go along with those below: [Rural Challenges and Summer Meals](#)

Sites should go where kids already are

The most highly attended SFSP sites are ones that meet more than the nutritional needs of kids. They are fun too. Community pools, parks, nonprofit programs, libraries, and youth centers are great options for a site location where program managers and kids can build in time for food.

A more involved but potentially doable option is to go mobile. A food truck, repurposed school bus, or box truck that can travel from site to site and serve at specified times in high traffic areas can increase participation.

[*See p. 5 for NE SFSP Equipment Grant opportunities](#)

Mobile Delivery



The Food Bank for the Heartland uses a small fleet of their own trucks and Salvation Army emergency services trucks to visit as many as 3 sites per day per truck during the summer. This is a great way to bring meals to the kids, rather than make families and kids come to you.

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

4. Sites should make location and design decisions with participation in mind

Sites should provide a safe, comfortable environment

Simple courtesy and service with a smile can go a long way to making kids comfortable. Incentives don't hurt either.

Comfortable and Inviting



FAIRBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In Fairbury, Jane Rhine puts in the extra effort to give away **daily door prizes** during meal service. Before the summer, Jane solicits small prizes like toys, pencils, hot wheels, or dolls from local businesses. Then she puts a sticker or two randomly on plates throughout meal service. When kids find a sticker, they get to come choose a small prize. Of course you have to be present to win!

Volunteers

“We draw volunteers to serve meals from the local high school, and their relationships with other youth and families helps to increase and regularize participation.”

- *Andy Chavanauk, Falls City Ministerial Association*



Andy Chavanak of Falls City, sponsor for the past 14 years, hires a teacher who is out for the summer to manage the SFSP program who has relationships with kids built in. The volunteers, described above, support food prep and help spread the word about the program too.

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

Design with Participation in Mind

Parent Meals



Welcoming parents through the SFSP, and even offering free parent meals, has many benefits. Although meals cannot be reimbursed through the SFSP, grant dollars or charging a small fee for adult meals are options that encourage parents, grandparents and caregivers to attend sites with children who can receive free meals. Free Omaha-area parent meals are the standard because of grant dollars. Kids are safer because these parents are present and everyone is less hungry because of it.

Sponsors and sites should evaluate and debrief to make improvements

Figuring out what works can be simple. Try some of these easy evaluation methods to find out what works best.

- Set a participation goal and see if you can meet it.
- Compare last year's participation numbers to this year's.
- Ask kids about what they liked or didn't like about the menu, location, or anything else.
- Host a debrief meeting with everyone involved in the SFSP - from purchasing to communications and parents to school district personnel, they all have a valuable perspective.

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

Design with Participation in Mind

SFSP Planning Timeline (from Food Research & Action Center)

- September / October: [Evaluating Last Summer](#)
- November / December: [Setting Goals for Next Summer](#)
- January: [Start Developing Action Plans for Summer Nutrition Programs](#)
- March / April: [Establishing Logistics](#)
- May / June: [Conducting Outreach and Navigating the Last-Minute Scramble](#)
- July / August: [Maintaining Momentum](#)

SFSP BEST PRACTICE

5. Sites should host activities at sites (and make them healthy!)

66% of Nebraska sponsors reported that they do some kind of activity at their SFSP sites with kids. Can we do more?

Sites that incorporate enrichment activities into their meal service have higher participation. Kids are more interested in returning when families know their kids are out of the house learning or engaged in physical activities.

Spike Events

Across the country, Spike Events have proven their ability to draw kids to sites and keep them coming back. Events like pool parties, petting zoos, and free concerts are generally low-cost, high-impact activities that help get more kids eating healthy meals.

Westside Community Schools



Jackie Cambridge, sponsor at Westside, hosted a Spike Event at the Camelot Community Center featuring Omaha Street Percussion in 2019. Kids and staff enjoyed an interactive performance as the group created music from household items. Following the performance, there was a large increase in participation, and more for the rest of the summer.



SFSP BEST PRACTICE

“We have activities for the children every Weds. for an hour before lunch. Arts, crafts, garden club.”

- Doris Hartman, Ansley Public School

3 EXCELLENT Activity Banks

- [USDA Activity Best Practices Idea Bank](#)
- [Hunger Free Colorado Food+Fun Activity Guide](#)
- [USDA Summer Food, Summer Moves Guide](#)

Nebraska Site Activity Bank

Below are a range of activities, physical, enrichment, and community partner run, that you can make happen with a little bit of planning. Most can be implemented with little to no cost.

	No Cost	Low Cost \$	More Cost \$\$
Physical Activities	Set up exercise stations and have kids do circuits.	Use donation dollars to buy jump ropes, hula hoops, or other sports equipment.	Host a Spike Event with a local musician or band and dance!
	Ask older teens to teach younger children a sport.	Play music through an mp3 player and have a dance party.	Give away passes to trampoline parks, public pools, or museums for good participation.
Enrichment Activities	Open the gym or outside area for sports and games.	Set out and encourage board games.	Create a community garden and incorporate lessons into your meals.
	Set up a cooking lesson with a community college or local chef.	Provide arts and crafts supplies and coloring books.	Host a Spike Event with farm animals or agricultural education.
Community Partner Activities	Work with a community partner like the YMCA or Nebraska Extension to bring in a wellness activity.	Work with the library or local nonprofit to organize a book giveaway.	Bring in a yoga or pilates instructor to provide lessons to kids.
	Ask the local fire or police department to provide a safety demonstration.	Partner with local health department to implement an integrated nutrition program with students.	Hire an Americorp VISTA to work with students on wellness and nutrition curriculum.

What Will You Do Next?



Of all these homegrown Nebraska ideas, we hope you'll take at least one away with you to try.

We'll be hosting and recording webinars including some of the featured Nebraska SFSP sponsors and the Nebraska Department of Education to share more about this toolkit and ways to increase participation.

If you've already decided on a best practice, activity, or efficiency to implement for this summer, please let us know what you're planning by filling out a 2-minute survey at neappleseed.org/summerfood.



Additional Resources

- **The Nebraska Department of Education is available to...**
 - offer resources through the [NDE Summer Food Website](#)
 - share school eligibility data
 - conduct training for new and returning sponsors
 - provide menus and record forms as tools for success
 - connect new sponsors with a sponsor mentor
- [USDA Summer Meals Toolkit](#)
- [No Kid Hungry Best Practices Summer Meals Website](#)

“It’s very easy - any school can do it. The state makes it very easy to participate. Even reporting isn’t really that hard. NDE is always there for you.”

- Cindy Curtis, Sidney Public Schools

In Their Own Words...



Surveys and interviews with SFSP sponsors revealed that care and compassion are what drive Nebraska's SFSP. See below for quotes from programs around the state.

"We are a small site but we are great for the children we do feed, as it means one less child is going without a meal this summer.

GLAD THIS PROGRAM IS AVAILABLE."

- Bonnie Sekutera, Loup City Public Schools

"Our July numbers are up from last year!"

- Jamie Ramirez, Schuyler Community Schools

"We have had a pretty great year."

- Susann Craig, Mitchell Public School

"I feel it is a very good program reaches a lot of children that may go hungry in the summer months. I hope we can continue serving the children."

- Joann Gaden, Johnson County Central School

"Last year we didn't have many walk-ins at our sites. Most of our participation came from students already enrolled in the site's programming. This year we have had more kids from the community coming in for meals! "

- Kendall Pratt, Food Bank of Lincoln

"We received many positive comments from the community about our program and how it assisted a portion of our community that needed the support. We had lots of support for our first year and are very happy with the results."

- John Brazell, McCook Public Schools

"Proud to partner with NDE to be able to provide free meals to children in our area."

- Diana Closson, Minatare Public Schools

Methods & Acknowledgements

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To find more information, please visit neappleseed.org/summerfood.

Nebraska Appleseed is a nonprofit organization that fights for justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans. We take a systemic approach to complex issues – such as child welfare, immigration policy, affordable health care, and poverty – and we take our work wherever we believe we can do the most good, whether that's at the courthouse, in the statehouse, or in the community.

