CALIFORNIA SUMMER MEAL COALITION

# Leveraging County Nutrition Action Plans (CNAP) to Keep Kids Healthy When School's Out:

*A Guide for Local Health Departments and Community Partners*

## Why Summer Matters: Making the Connection to Children's Health

For children living in poverty, school may be the only reliable source of healthy food. When school closes for the summer break, many of these students lose access to the nutritious meals provided by the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). With fewer opportunities to participate in organized activities or summer learning programs, summer may also mean more sedentary behavior and consumption of unhealthy foods among low-income children and youth.

The extended separation from school during summer vacation can bring with it added risks of food insecurity, childhood obesity, and exacerbated summer learning loss for low-income students. Understanding these intersections can support efforts to bring together a diverse group of community partners and align goals. According to the National Summer Learning Association, summer can have a significant impact on their health and development:

**According to a 2013 survey conducted by Share Our Strength, more than half of families participating in NSLP find it difficult to make ends meet in summer; 43% of those families report not having enough food.**

*Source: Share Our Strength Summer Meal Survey, 2013*

- **Children may gain weight two to three times faster during the summer than during the school year**; African-American and Latino children, and children who are already overweight are at even greater risk.[i]
- Obesity prevention efforts must extend beyond the school environment as "**unhealthy weight gain occurs mainly in non-school environments**"; **interventions that do not address summer may lessen the impact of school-year efforts**.[ii]
- Food insecurity rises in summer; **many families struggle to obtain food**.[iii]
- The summer experiences of low-income students may have a longer-term impact on the achievement gap. [iv] **Low-income youth are likely to face greater summer learning loss** than their more affluent peers; in addition to exacerbated learning loss in math skills, low-income youth are likely to fall behind in reading skills.[v] The cumulative effects of summer learning loss on low-income students may make it difficult to close the achievement gap through school year efforts alone.[vi]

## USDA Summer Nutrition Programs

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) summer nutrition programs are designed to help alleviate the nutrition gap left during extended school closures, like summer break. Summer nutrition—or summer meal—programs enable school districts, local and tribal governments, and community-based agencies to provide free, nutritious meals to children age 18 and under in low-income neighborhoods. *See Table 1 for a description of USDA programs offering summer meals.*

Across the nation, however, summer meal programs are vastly underutilized. Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) reports that in July 2012, fewer than 3 million of the nation's 20 million eligible children participated in a summer meal program.[vii] In California, only 17 percent of the state's eligible children participated in a summer meal program in July 2012.[viii]

*Table 1: USDA Programs Offering Summer Meals*

| Program | Eligible Organizations | Overview |
|---|---|---|
| **National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program (NSLP/SBP)** | Public and private nonprofit schools; public and private nonprofit licensed residential child care institutions | Public schools operating summer school or on a year-round calendar may continue their operations following the same administration and eligibility procedures. |
| **Summer Food Service Program** | Public or private nonprofit schools, units of local or tribal governments, nonprofit agencies, and nonprofit colleges and universities | Agencies may provide meals to children at school or community sites in neighborhoods where at least 50% of children in the area are Free/reduced-price lunch (FRP)-eligible. Enrolled expanded learning programs in which at least 50% of students are FRP-qualified may also be eligible. |
| **Seamless Summer Feeding Option (SSFO)** | Public schools and county offices of education operating NSLP or SBP | This streamlined option enables schools already operating federal child nutrition programs to provide meals during summer vacation for schools following the traditional calendar, or in off-track periods lasting more than ten days in year-round schools. As in NSLP, meals provided through SSFO must follow the new meal patterns prescribed by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. |

In many communities, underutilization often stems from a dearth of summer meal sites or sponsors, lack of community awareness, and/or inconsistent program quality. Without the structure of the school year, summer meal programs provide a unique opportunity to bring together community partners to:

- Facilitate access to healthy food for low-income children and teens
- Provide nutrition education and physical activity
- Help SNAP-eligible families access community resources and services.

In addition to providing nutritious food, summer meal programs can enhance nutrition education efforts and connect low-income families with other community resources. They provide an opportunity to build relationships with summer learning and enrichment programs such as school district-based programs, Boys & Girls Clubs, faith-based camps, park and recreation programs, and public libraries. Summer learning and nutrition programs can support the development of California's most vulnerable children and youth, ensuring that they return to school in the fall, healthy and ready to learn.

**Together, local health departments, schools, and community partners can protect the health of California's children by facilitating continued access to nutritious meals when school is out.**

## The Role of CNAPs

SNAP-Ed-funded health departments have an unprecedented opportunity to increase participation in local summer meal programs through County Nutrition Action Plans (CNAPs). CNAP workgroups can bring together USDA Food and Nutrition (FNS)-funded agencies and other community partners to facilitate a collaborative, local approach to ensure low-income children have access to healthy food when school is out.

**Resources**

CNAP Toolkit & Model Plans

USDA Summer Nutrition Programs

FRAC Summer Meal Program Standards of Excellence

California Summer Meal Coalition *(webinars, case studies to support operations and nutrition education integration)*

2013 County Participation Data

Summer Meal Site Locations

Harvest of the Month

Children's Power Play!

Rethink Your Drink

USDA Great Garden Detective

CA Farm to School

Successful summer meal programs are built on strong community partnerships and coordinated messaging. CNAP partners can play a key role in making sure that the community has an adequate number of summer meal sites—and that summer meal sites are easily accessible, desirable, and offer high-quality food and activities.

*Access*
Some communities do not have an adequate number of summer meal sites or have experienced a dramatic reduction in the number of sites due to city or school district budget cuts. CNAP partners can help determine if there is an adequate number of sites and if they are located in areas that are easily accessible to families. CNAP partners can collaborate to identify and address barriers to access, including issues related to transportation, heat, and site safety.

*Outreach*
According to a nationwide survey conducted by Share Our Strength, only 40 percent of low-income families know where to find summer meals in their community. CNAP partners can play a key role in promoting summer meal programs to low-income families. Summer meal programs, can, in exchange, often provide a venue to connect low-income families with other community resources.

*Quality*
Summer meal programs offer an opportunity to leverage Farm to Fork efforts and summer's agricultural abundance to increase access to fresh, locally sourced fruits and vegetables. CNAP partners can support summer meal providers by connecting them with local growers, facilitating collaborations to provide supplementary produce for families to take home.* In addition, CNAP partners can help summer meal programs by providing volunteers or programming. High-quality food and engaging activities can increase participation.

Nutrition education activities can fill the programming gap left in many communities and keep kids moving while promoting healthy habits. The *Network for a Healthy California*'s *Children's Power Play! Campaign Power Up Your Summer! Challenge* offers an opportunity to highlight the importance of nutrition and physical activity in summer. Harvest of the Month offers curriculum and materials to support a year-round Farm to Fork program.

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** USDA summer nutrition programs do not provide reimbursement for adult meals. Some summer meal providers report that this can be a barrier to child participation in programs. CNAP partners can support providers where this is an issue by helping to find alternatives to address hunger among adult family members in tandem with summer meal programs. More information about program rules is available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/handbooks*

## Planning a Summer Strategy

Supporting local summer meal programs through CNAPs begins by bringing together a broad range of partners. Partners like food banks, school districts, WIC, cooperative extension, CalFresh, and nutrition education agencies are instrumental to supporting summer nutrition and other federal assistance programs. Summer opens up the door to new collaborations as well.

Examples of other partners to consider:

- Parks and recreation department
- City and/or county library
- Community clinic
- YMCA
- Boys & Girls Club
- Police Athletic League
- Youth Service Groups
- Faith community
- Migrant education
- Summer learning programs
- Nonprofit organizations
- Community Hospitals
- Colleges and Universities
- Central California Alliance for Health *(or similar Medi-Cal-related partner)*
- County offices of education
- 2-1-1
- City manager / city council
- Community action agencies

Summer meal program planning happens well before summer. Meeting with CNAP partners and summer meal providers should also begin early to ensure success. For CNAP groups that meet quarterly, planning should begin in the fall. Many CNAP workgroups begin this process by inviting partners to share a short presentation about their agencies' services, resources, and outreach channels.

## Planning Timeline

| Task | Timeframe |
|---|---|
| Include summer meals in CNAP planning process | September |
| Assess summer landscape; number and location of summer meal sites from previous summer; availability of summer learning/enrichment programs and resources; inventory of summer resources and programs of CNAP partners and others | November - December |
| Meet with summer meal providers to determine needs and opportunities for CNAP partner support | January |
| Recruit summer meal sites if needed | February-March |
| Meet with school district leadership (superintendent, school board members) and/or city leadership to secure leadership support and promotion strategy | January-February |
| Plan nutrition education component for summer meal sites | March - April |
| Determine strategy for promoting other Food Nutrition Services (FNS) programs (CalFresh, etc.) through summer meal sites | May |
| Plan and conduct outreach for summer meal programs through CNAP partner networks | Early June - August |
| Meet with summer meal providers to explore opportunities to support/expand access to USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) after school meals and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) | June-July |
| Evaluate CNAP partner impact on summer meal program participation | September |

## Promising Practices

*Merced County* - WIC was instrumental in helping children access summer meals by acting as a summer meal site (and using volunteers to engage kids in activities) and informing mothers about the program. WIC represents a trusted information source. Share Our Strength reports that 67 percent of WIC participants wanted to receive information from their local WIC office.[ix]

*Contra Costa County* – CNAP partners coordinated efforts to provide nutrition education activities at Pittsburg USD's summer meal kick-off event, which attracted 1,200 children and families—a significant increase from the previous year.

*Riverside County* – School districts were invited to attend CNAP meetings to share plans and garner promotional support from partners. As a result, more school districts initiated summer meal programs and developed new outreach channels among partners also working with families (e.g., childcare providers). In addition, the group has been working to connect schools, parks, and WIC.

*Orange County* – Organizers developed a coordinated communication campaign, including a bilingual poster with a central phone number and website, to help staff and families easily locate sites. CNAP partners displayed the summer meal posters in CalFresh, Head Start, WIC, schools, community centers, public housing, emergency food and other sites. The local list was designed to include both community-based and school information, organized by city, with meals and operation hours listed.

*San Diego County* – CNAP partners worked closely to support San Diego USD's kick-off event, which included a resource fair featuring health services, CalFresh pre-screening, nutrition education activities, produce for families, and other resources for families. In partnership with 2-1-1 San Diego, the county now has an online information page and interactive map to help families locate summer meal sites in their neighborhood. In addition, partners have trained Girl Scouts to regularly lead nutrition education activities at summer meal sites.

## Conclusion

Across the state, CNAP workgroups are finding ways to address the unique challenges related to summertime food access and creating innovative opportunities to promote nutrition, physical activity and community resources. Effective planning, connecting with other CNAP workgroups, and engaging non-Food Nutrition Services (FNS) funded partners are crucial to ensuring that summertime is fun and healthy for all children in California.

## Additional Information

For questions or additional information:
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