

Rural Non-Congregate Meals in the SFSP



Reaching Children in Rural Areas

On December 29, 2022, President Biden signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (the Act) (P.L. 117-328). The Act included significant policy changes for Child Nutrition Programs, including the authorization of a permanent, non-congregate meal service through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) for rural areas with no congregate meal service and established the permanent Summer EBT Program beginning in summer 2024.

As a result, SFSP Sponsors may now provide non-congregate meals in rural areas, when a congregate meal service is not operating.

What is Non-Congregate Meal Service? Non-congregate meal service means a food service at which meals are provided for children to consume all of the components *off site*. Non-congregate meal service must only be operated at sites designated as “Rural” and with no “Congregate meal service”. Prior to The Act, meals were required to be served and eaten on site, except for allowing children to take one grain, fruit or vegetable item with them.

Why provide Non-congregate Meals? To provide broader access to nutritious meals in the summer months, when school is not in session, in areas where it is more difficult for children to participate in congregate meals or when there is a lack of facilities to host congregate meals. There are benefits of congregate meal service, which often also provide enrichment activities. Sponsors are encouraged to continue to provide these opportunities when feasible.

Here are some instances where non-congregates meals may be provided.

After summer programming has ended (i.e., summer school, recreation program, etc.) it may not be feasible to continue to offer summer meals as children do not have easy access to the site.

When a rural area does not have a facility to use to host a congregate site, non-congregate meals could be offered all summer.

When a sponsor can only provide one congregate meal (i.e., provides a congregate lunch, but cannot provide a congregate breakfast).

When the only other summer meal sites nearby are closed to community participation and there are no other means to host a congregate site.

When a sponsor cannot staff a congregate program but has enough resources to prepare and provide non-congregate meals once or twice a week.

When congregate meals are not available all days of the week, non-congregate meals may be provided for days of the week that the congregate site is not operating (i.e., the weekend).

Eligibility Requirements

1. The sponsor applying to provide non-congregate meals may be any service institution that meets the definition of sponsor in Program regulations (7 CFR 225.2). This includes public and private nonprofit school food authorities, units of local, municipal, county or state government, tribal governments, and private, nonprofit organizations.

Eligible sponsors must be in good standing in its operation of the Child Nutrition Programs and complete a Rural Non-congregate Integrity and Meal Service Plan, prior to completing the SFSP application.

2. The site must be located in a Rural Area.
 - Rural areas are identified within the Rural Designation Map, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/rural-designation>.
 - If the rural area is 'area eligible,' meaning it is located within the attendance area of a school that has 50% of its children eligible for free and reduced-price meals OR within a census tract that qualifies, then meals for *all children* may be claimed for reimbursement.
 - When the rural area is *not* area eligible, the sponsor is reimbursed for only the meals served to children that qualify for free and reduced-price meals. When serving meals to children in areas that are not area eligible, the sponsor must be sure to prevent overt identification of those eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

Meal Delivery Models

Home Delivery - This model is designed to deliver meals directly to homes. Delivery could be completed by mail or delivery service or could be hand-delivered by the sponsor's staff, volunteers, or others. The sponsor must confirm the number of children 18 and under within the household, get written consent to deliver, and may provide multiple days worth of meals at one time. The number of days worth of meals to be served at one time will be determined on a case-by-case basis, not to exceed 10 days. The limit is 5 days, when bulk meals are provided.

Meal Pickup - This service model is designed to provide packaged meals that are taken home for children to eat later. Examples of meal pickup include "grab and go," curbside service, or take-home backpacks. If meals are provided to a parent or guardian without the children present, the number of children 18 and under in the household must be confirmed prior to providing the meal. The number of days worth of meals to be served at one time will be determined on a case-by-case basis, not to exceed 10 days.

Other Requirements Include

- Sites can provide up to two meals or a meal and a snack, just like congregate open, restricted open, and closed enrolled sites.
- Meals must meet the approved meal pattern requirements.
- Meals are to be served during the approved meal service time.
- Sponsors must continue to provide meal modifications for participants with disabilities when appropriately documented.
- Civil rights requirements, such as data collection, notification of the community, posting the Justice for All Poster, and training are still required.
- Sponsors must monitor sites, just as they would congregate sites.
- Meals are to be counted at the point of service and properly documented with production records, invoices, inventory records, etc.