



# 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Meal Service

## Results from the 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey

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## Background

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provide nutritious meals to children when schools are not in session during the summer months, school breaks, and unanticipated school closures. The SFSP and SSO are collectively referred to as USDA Summer Meal Programs. Through the Summer Meal Programs, sponsoring organizations (“sponsors”) provide meals and snacks to children at meal sites in their communities; these meals are served at no cost to children.

Summer Meal Program sites can be either open or closed enrolled, and both site types can qualify for area eligibility based on rates of free or reduced-price school meals eligibility. Open sites are located in areas where at least half of the children in the area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, and any child aged 18 and under who attends the site can receive free meals without submitting an application or other eligibility information. Closed enrolled sites restrict meal service to participants who are enrolled at the site. In order to qualify for SFSP or SSO, at least half of the children at a closed enrolled site must be eligible for free or reduced-price meals, or the site must be located in an eligible area.

Until 2020, meals served through the Summer Meal Programs were required to be consumed in a congregate setting on the meal site premises.<sup>1</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) allowed State agencies to waive the congregate meal service requirement for Child Nutrition Program operators through temporary authority granted by Congress under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 (FFRCA).<sup>2</sup> The waivers allowed SFSP and SSO sites to distribute meals to children and teens through pick-up or delivery in the summer months of 2020, 2021, and 2022, making it safer for participants and site workers during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 permanently authorized a non-congregate meal service option for operators of SFSP and SSO in qualifying rural areas beginning in Summer 2023. FNS conducted a preliminary evaluation of the new meal service option by surveying sponsors who implemented non-congregate meal service in rural areas during Summer 2023. Results are reported below and reflect program operations during Summer 2023. With publication of the Interim Final Rule: *Establishing the*

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<sup>1</sup> [Federal Register :: Establishing the Summer EBT Program and Rural Non-Congregate Option in the Summer Meal Programs](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Pub. L. 116-127](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic, March Through September 2020 | Food and Nutrition Service \(usda.gov\)](#)

*Summer EBT Program and Rural Non-congregate Option in the Summer Meal Programs (RIN# 0584-AE96)* on December 29, 2023, some program rules were modified for Summer 2024 and beyond.

## Non-congregate Meal Service Flexibilities

For Summer 2023, USDA provided guidance on non-congregate meal service operations in rural areas, including four operational flexibilities. Most of the non-congregate flexibilities allowed for Summer 2023 operations were allowed through previous demonstrations, waivers, and guidance on non-congregate meal service operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Summer 2023, States were allowed to implement state-wide restrictions on these flexibilities based on the needs of their State.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in Summer 2024, State-wide restrictions on meal service flexibilities are not permitted. However, States can restrict some flexibilities for specific sponsors on a case-by-case basis.

**Non-Congregate meal service type:** FNS guidance for Summer 2023 described two non-congregate meal service types: meal pick up and meal delivery.

**Multi-day meal issuance:** FNS guidance for Summer 2023 allowed up to 10 days-worth of meals to be distributed at one time through unitized meals or through proper amounts of single-serving meal components. Some States limited the number of days-worth of meals to 5 or 7 days.

**Bulk food distribution:** FNS guidance for Summer 2023 allowed bulk foods to be used in multi-meal issuance. Bulk foods are food items packaged in multiple servings, such as gallons of milk or loaves of bread.

**Parent/Guardian pick-up:** FNS guidance for Summer 2023 allowed parents or guardians to receive meals on behalf of children in their household without the children present.

Twenty-three States applied restrictions to one or more of the non-congregate meal service flexibilities described above in 2023. Only one State restricted all four flexibilities by not allowing meal delivery service, multi-day meal issuance, bulk food distribution, or parent/guardian pick-up. FNS included questions about all four flexibilities in our survey (Appendix A).

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<sup>4</sup> [Rural Non-Congregate Examples for Summer 2023 Final \(azuredge.us\)](https://www.azuredge.us/);

## Methods

In October 2023, FNS requested a list of sponsors from 53 State agencies that participated in SFSP or SSO non-congregate meal service in Summer 2023.<sup>5</sup> In addition to contact information for each sponsor, State agencies were asked to provide several details on the sponsor's operations for the sampling frame, including the number of sites supported by each sponsor and sponsor type.<sup>6</sup>

On March 7, 2024, a survey (Appendix A) was distributed to every program contact (N=942) provided by State agencies. Data collection ended May 1, 2024. Over half of sponsors (556, 59 percent) responded to the survey before it closed.<sup>7</sup> Survey respondents represent 2,730 non-congregate meal service sites, which is 70 percent of all non-congregate sites reported by State agencies for Summer 2023.

## Sponsor and Site Participation

Based on data collected from all State agencies that offered non-congregate meal service, there were 942 sponsors operating non-congregate meal service at 3,903 sites across the United States at some point in Summer 2023. Twenty-nine percent of sponsors were schools or school food authorities (SFAs) that operated SSO. The remaining 71 percent of sponsors were a mix of organizations administering SFSP, including SFAs, private non-profit organizations, other governments (local, municipal, or county governments or Indian Tribal Organizations) and residential camps. About 13 percent of all SFSP sponsors served non-congregate meals in July 2023<sup>8</sup>.

Three quarters (76 percent) of non-congregate meal service sponsors reported non-congregate meals for two or three months in Summer 2023, and sixteen percent only reported meals for one month. This aligns with a typical school schedule, which includes two or three of summer vacation within the 5-month summer meal service period. Less than one percent reported meals for every month from May to September (See Table 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Five State agencies did not operate non-congregate meal service in Summer 2023. Two State agencies offered the option, but none of their summer meals sponsors chose to operate non-congregate meal service.

<sup>6</sup> Variables of interest: Sponsor type (School/SFA, State Government, Local/County Government, Indian Tribal Organization (ITO), Residential Camp, or Private Non-Profit Organization); Total number of sites (congregate and non-congregate); Total number of non-congregate sites; the non-congregate meal service method each sponsor was authorized to use; whether sponsors operated open enrolled sites, closed enrolled sites, or a combination thereof; which months each sponsor operated non-congregate meal service (May to September).

<sup>7</sup> Sponsors from Oklahoma, Texas, and Oregon are slightly underrepresented in the sample (20 to 30 percent response rates). Among sponsor types, Indian Tribal Organizations are underrepresented in this sample (14 percent response rate). Medium-sized sponsors (5 to 25 sites) may be overrepresented (80 percent) compared to small or large sponsors. All other subsets of this sample (sponsor type, program enrollment, meal service method, and site enrollment characteristics) had response rates between 52 and 71 percent.

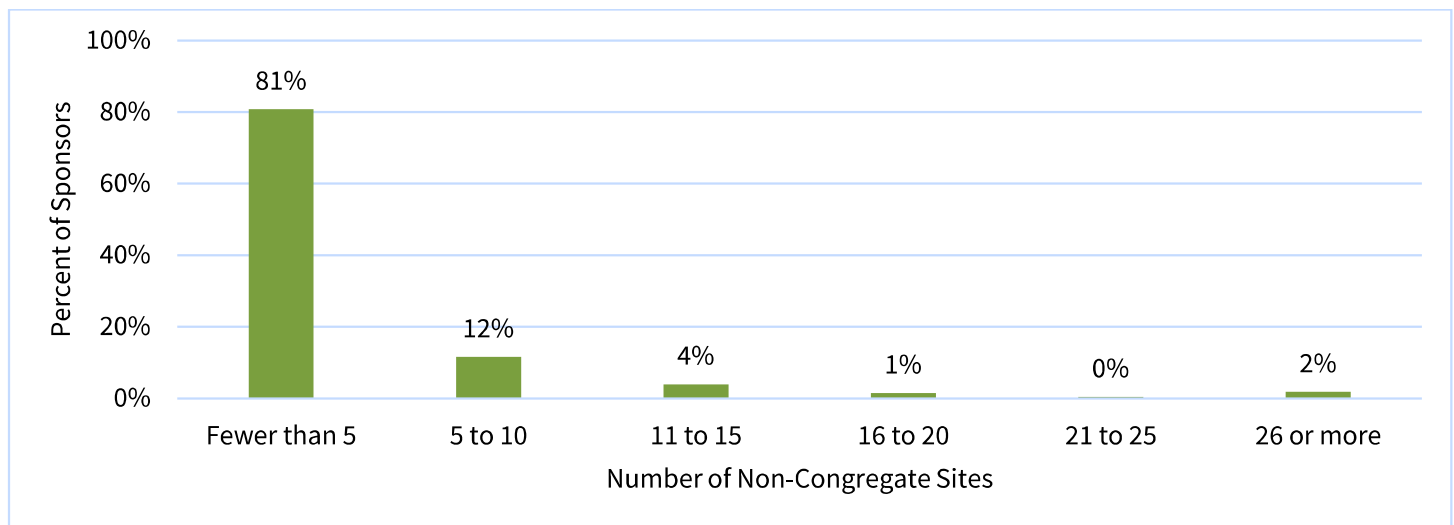
<sup>8</sup> Source: National Data Bank, FNS-418, part D. Data not available for SSO.

**Table 1. Number of sites and sponsors operating non-congregate meal service each month of Summer 2023 according to State agencies<sup>i</sup>.**

<b>NON- CONGREGATE</b>	<b>MAY</b>	<b>JUNE</b>	<b>JULY</b>	<b>AUGUST</b>	<b>SEPTEMBER</b>
<b>SPONSORS</b>	175	864	774	400	10
<b>(N = 942)</b>	(18.5%)	(91.7%)	(82.2%)	(42.4%)	(1.0%)
<b>SITES</b>	865	3,673	3,544	1,924	31
<b>(N = 3,903)</b>	(22.2%)	(96.8%)	(93.2%)	(49.3%)	(0.7%)

<sup>i</sup> Source: Summer Non-Congregate 2023 Sample Frame Collection; N=942

**Figure 1. Number of non-congregate meal service sites per sponsor according to State agencies<sup>ii</sup>.**



<sup>ii</sup> Source: Summer Non-Congregate 2023 Sample Frame Collection; N=942

Most sponsors of non-congregate meal service (81 percent) operated fewer than five non-congregate sites (Figure 1), and 42 percent only operated one non-congregate meal site in Summer 2023. The proportion of single-site sponsors was slightly higher for non-congregate meal service in Summer 2023 than it was for congregate meal service in SSO and SFSP in Summer 2018 (35 percent).<sup>9</sup> Though most sponsors of non-congregate meal service operated a small number of sites, a handful of sponsors had 26 or more sites.

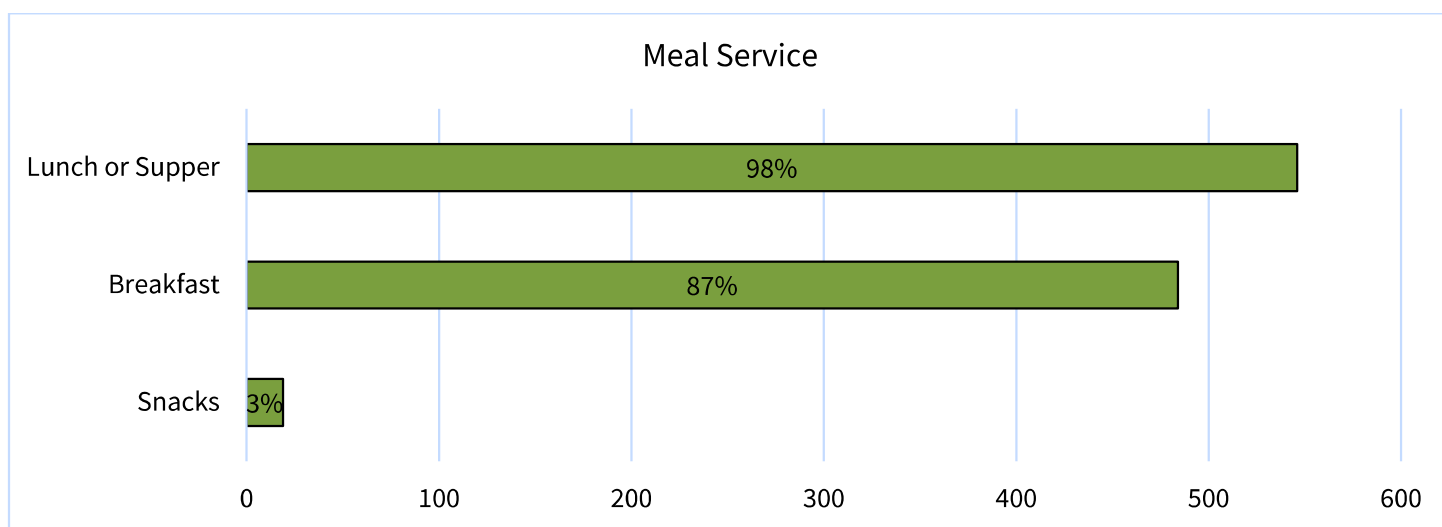
<sup>9</sup> [USDA Summer Meals Study | Food and Nutrition Service](#)

Together, these 17 sponsors, located in 10 States, operated nearly a fifth of all sites that served non-congregate meals in Summer 2023.

SSO and SFSP sites may claim breakfast and one other meal, one meal and one snack, or up to two snacks per day. Most sites may not claim lunch **and** supper for the same participant on the same day.<sup>10</sup> Most respondents (98 percent) provided lunch or supper through non-congregate meal service, while 87 percent of respondents provided breakfast (Figure 2).

The most common combination of meals served through non-congregate meal service was breakfast and either lunch or supper (85 percent). One in ten sponsors only served either lunch or supper through non-congregate meal service and three percent of sponsors provided a snack with lunch or supper. The remaining combinations of meals were provided by less than 2 percent of sponsors.

**Figure 2. Meals and snacks served by non-congregate meal service sponsors in Summer 2023<sup>iii</sup>.**



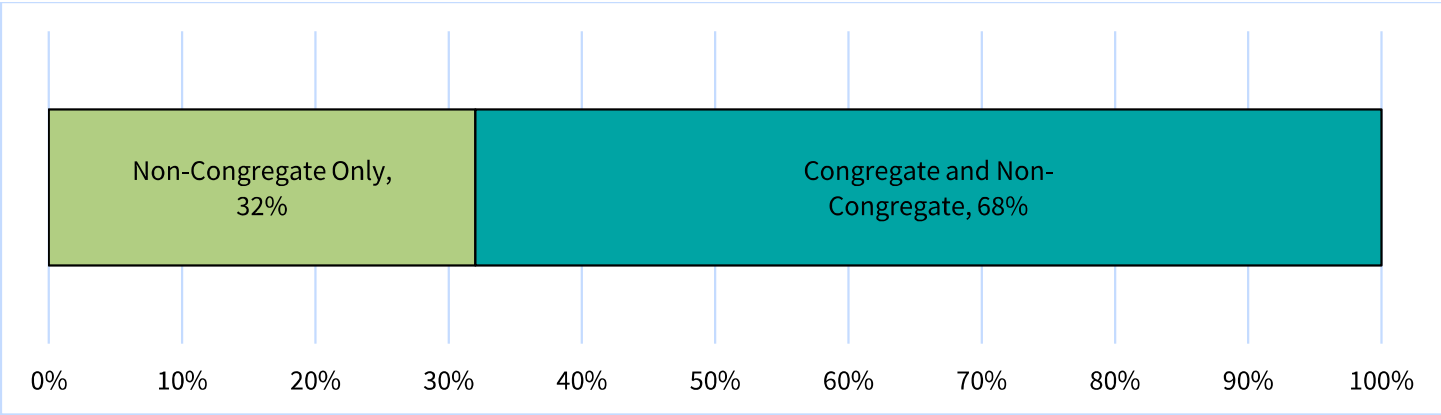
<sup>iii</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Question S7; N=556

Nearly one-third of the sponsors who responded to the survey (32 percent) operated only non-congregate sites; the remaining two-thirds operated both congregate and non-congregate sites (68 percent) (Figure 3). The data does not allow us to distinguish whether these sponsors were operating congregate and non-

<sup>10</sup> Residential camps and sites that serve primarily migrant children may serve up to three meals or two meals and one snack per day. They are exempt from the restriction on serving lunch and supper to the same participant in the same day.

congregate sites in separate locations or if they were operating hybrid meal sites that provide both non-congregate and congregate service at the same location.

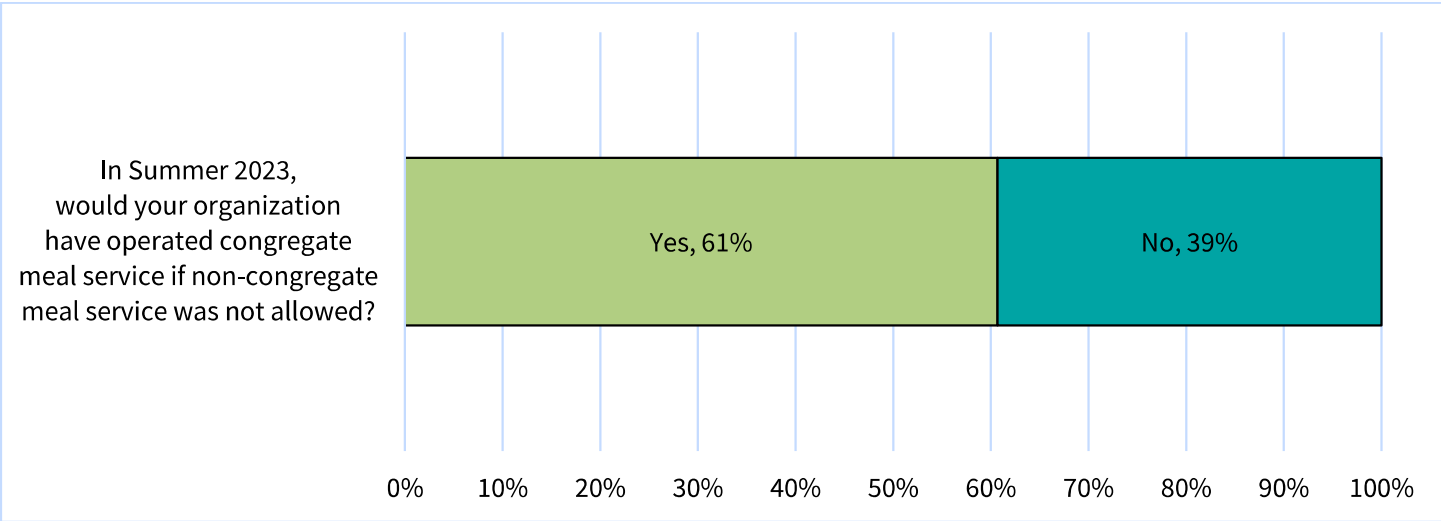
**Figure 3. The proportion of sponsors who sponsored only non-congregate meal service and those who sponsored both congregate and non-congregate meal service in Summer 2023<sup>iv</sup>.**



<sup>iv</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Question S4; N=556

We asked sponsors who only operated non-congregate meal service if the non-congregate meal service option influenced their decision to serve meals in Summer 2023 (Figure 4). About 4 in ten respondents (39 percent) who only operated non-congregate sites in Summer 2023 would not have operated congregate sites if the non-congregate option had not been available. This suggests that about 12 percent of all non-congregate meal service sponsors would not have participated in USDA Summer Meal Programs without the non-congregate meal service option.

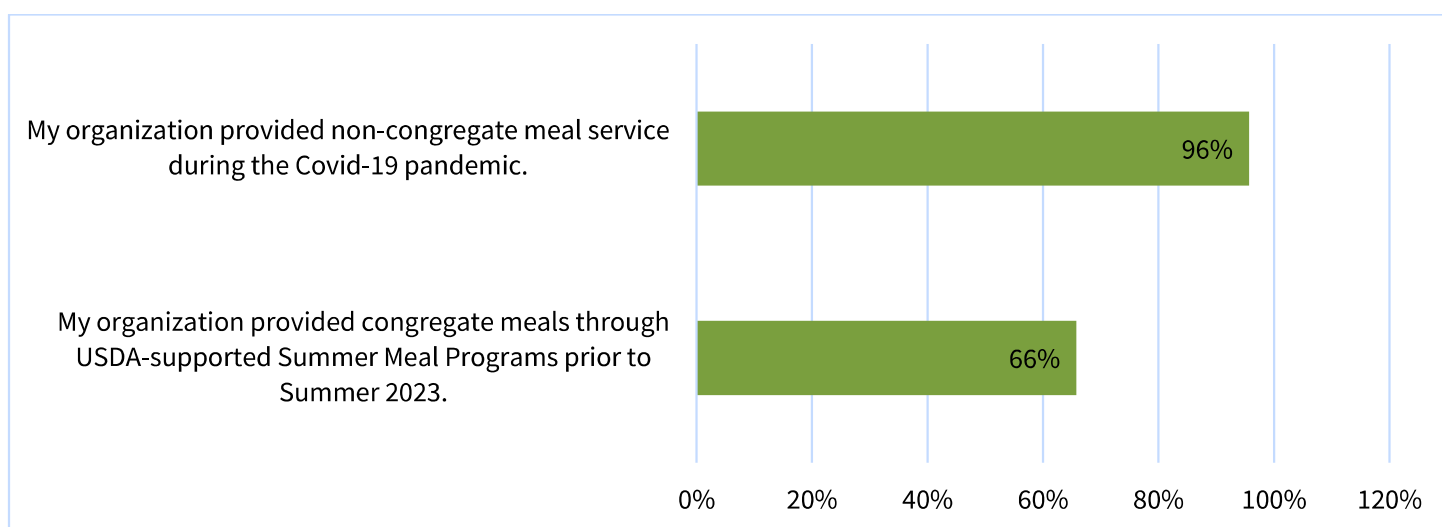
**Figure 4. Non-congregate only sponsors’ alternative plans for Summer 2023 if the non-congregate meal service option had not been available<sup>v</sup>.**



## Sponsor Experiences

The survey asked questions about sponsors' experience with the summer meals programs (Figure 5). Nearly all (99 percent) of non-congregate meal service sponsors in Summer 2023 participated in summer meal services in previous years, most commonly through non-congregate meal service during the pandemic.

**Figure 5. Non-congregate meal service sponsors' previous experience with USDA Summer Meal Programs and non-congregate meal service<sup>vi</sup>.**



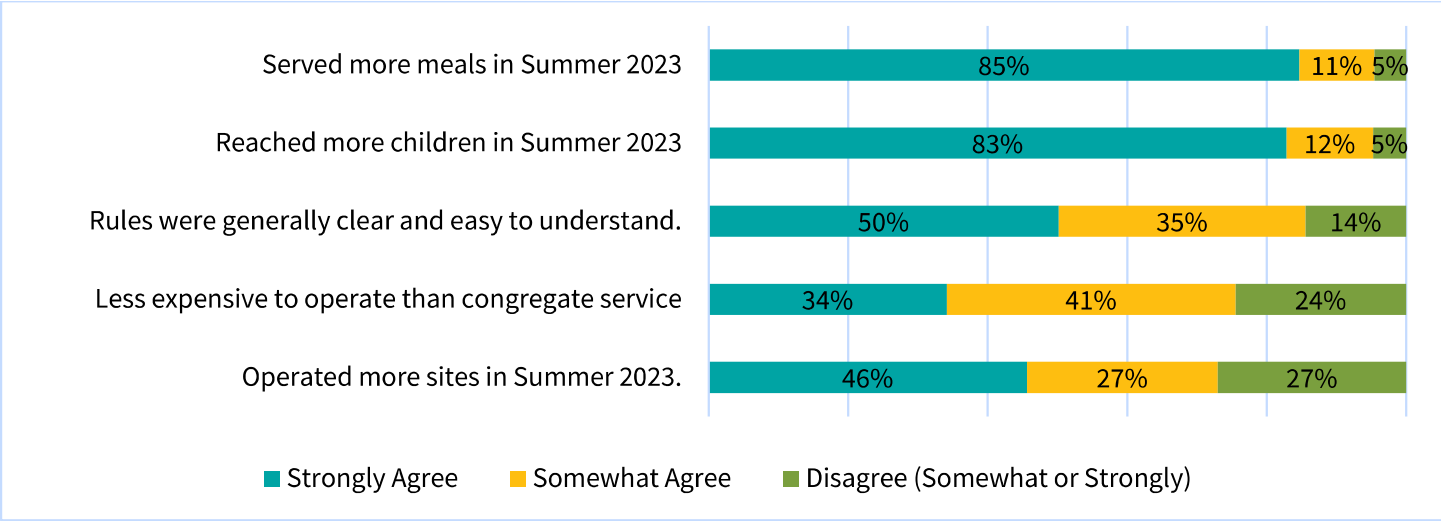
<sup>vi</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Question S1; N=556; Respondents could select multiple answers.

Nearly two thirds of sponsors (63 percent) indicated that they provided meals through congregate meal service prior to 2023 **and** through non-congregate meal service during the pandemic<sup>11</sup>.

The survey also asked sponsors their opinions about non-congregate meal service in Summer 2023. Almost all sponsors agreed that non-congregate meal service allowed them to serve more meals and reach more children in Summer 2023 (Figure 6).

<sup>11</sup> More information about meal service flexibilities related to the pandemic can be found here: [CN Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic, July 2020 - Dec. 2021 | Food and Nutrition Service \(usda.gov\)](#)

**Figure 6. Sponsors agreed or disagreed with statements about summer non-congregate meal service in Summer 2023<sup>vii</sup>.**



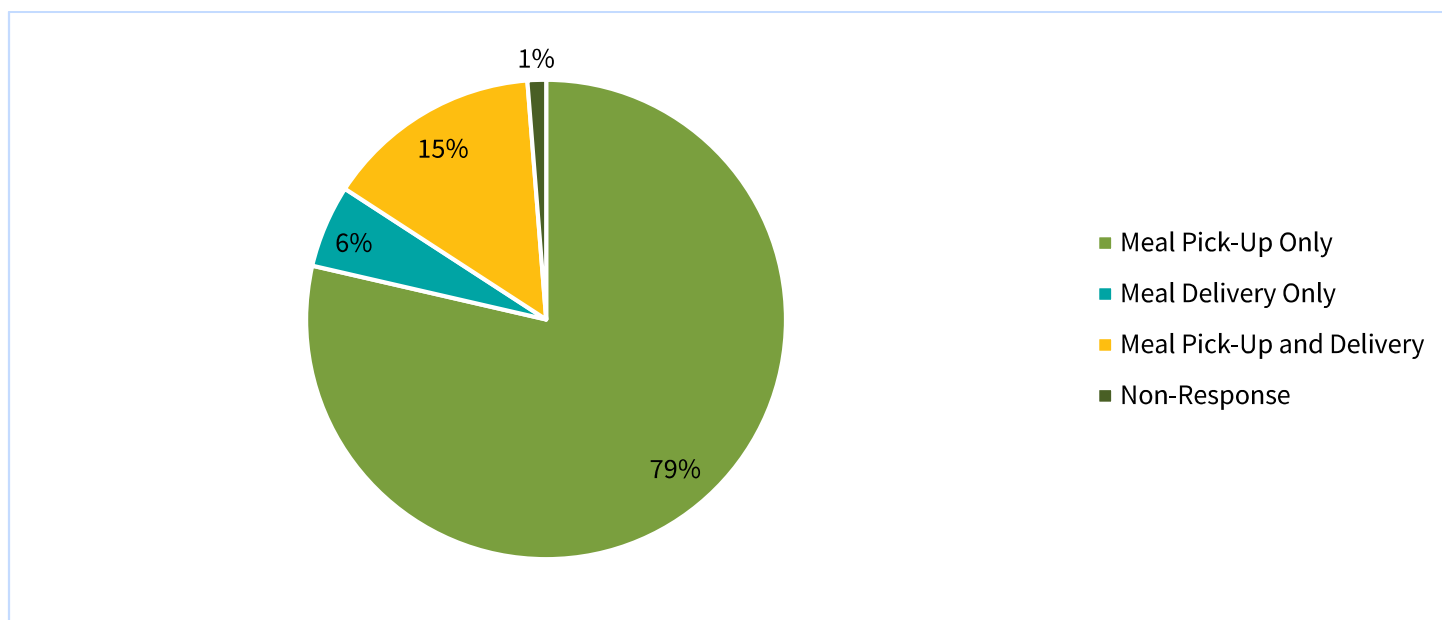
<sup>vii</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Question S2; N=556

Most sponsors also agreed that they were able to operate more sites in Summer 2023 because of non-congregate meal service and that non-congregate meal service was less expensive to operate than congregate meal service, though the rate of agreement for both statements is noticeably lower than others in Figure 6.

## Non-Congregate Meal Service Flexibilities

Most sponsors (94 percent) operated non-congregate meal service through meal pick up sites, either alone or in combination with meal delivery. Only 6 percent relied on meal delivery only (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Non-congregate meal service methods among survey respondents<sup>viii</sup>.**



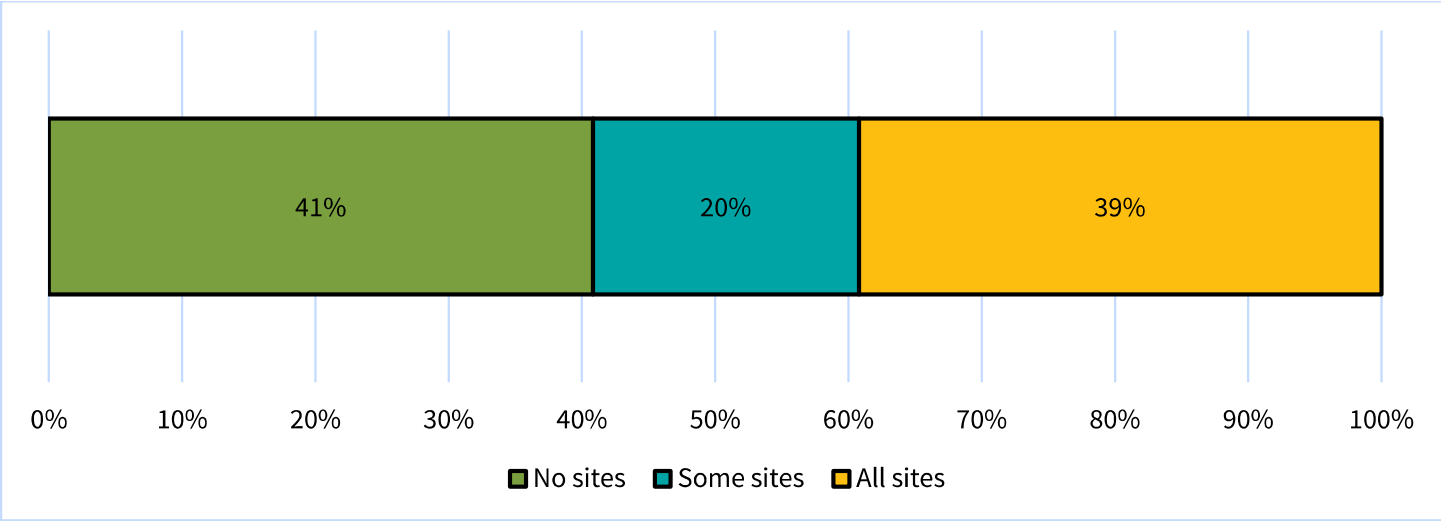
<sup>viii</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsors Survey, Question S13; N=556, non-response = 7

Most sponsors (85 percent) used at least one other non-congregate meal service flexibilities beyond selecting a meal service type. Nearly three quarters (74 percent) of sponsors allowed parents or guardians to accept non-congregate meals on behalf of participants.

More than half of sponsors (59 percent) reported that some or all of their sites participated in multi-day meal issuance in summer 2023 (Figure 8). Of those sponsors that participated in multi-day meal issuance, more than half (55 percent) distributed five to seven days-worth of meals at one time. Most of the remaining sponsors that participated in multi-day meal issuance (43 percent) distributed two to four days-worth of meals at a time.

More than half of those sponsors that participated in multi-day meal issuance distributed foods in bulk (54 percent); a quarter of multi-day meal issuance participants said they only distributed milk in bulk.

**Figure 8. Proportion of sponsors who reported that none, some, or all of their sites participated in multi-day meal issuance in Summer 2023<sup>ix</sup>.**

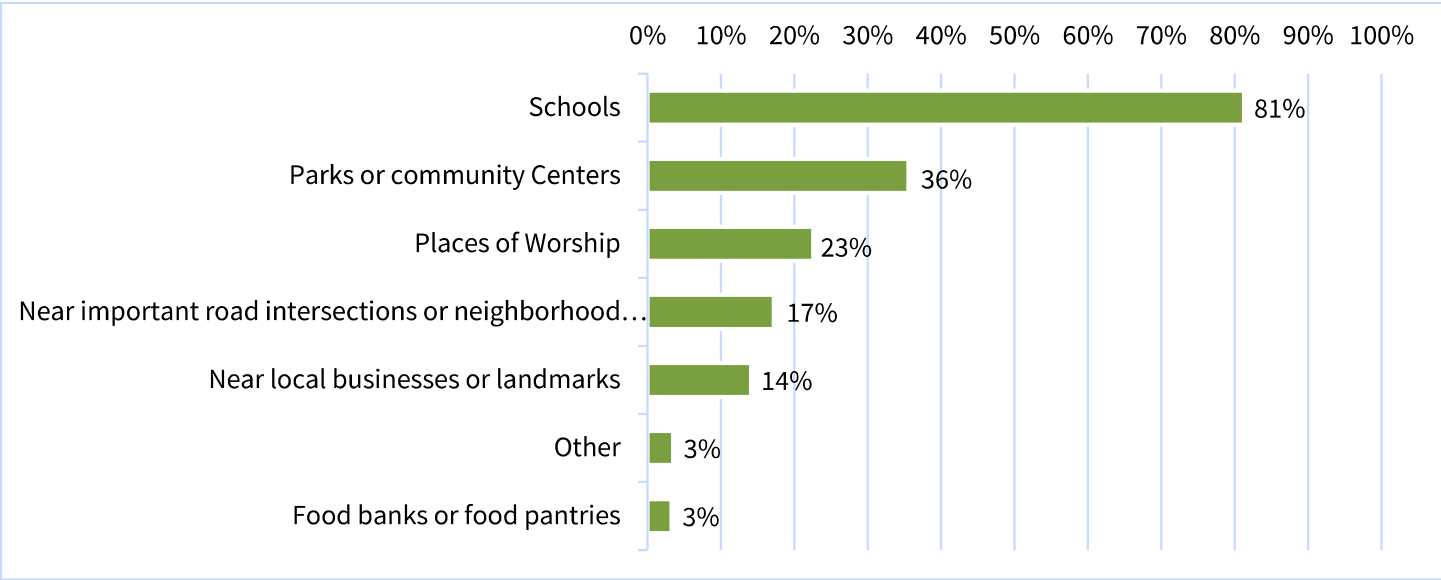


<sup>ix</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Question S8; N=556

**Meal Pick Up Sites**

Among respondents, 518 distributed non-congregate meals through pick up sites in summer 2023. Most sponsors (81 percent) operated pick up sites at schools (exclusively or in combination with other locations) (Figure 9). Other than schools, non-congregate meal pick up sites were mostly located at parks and community centers, places of worship, and in neighborhoods.

**Figure 9. Locations of non-congregate meal pick up sites\*.**



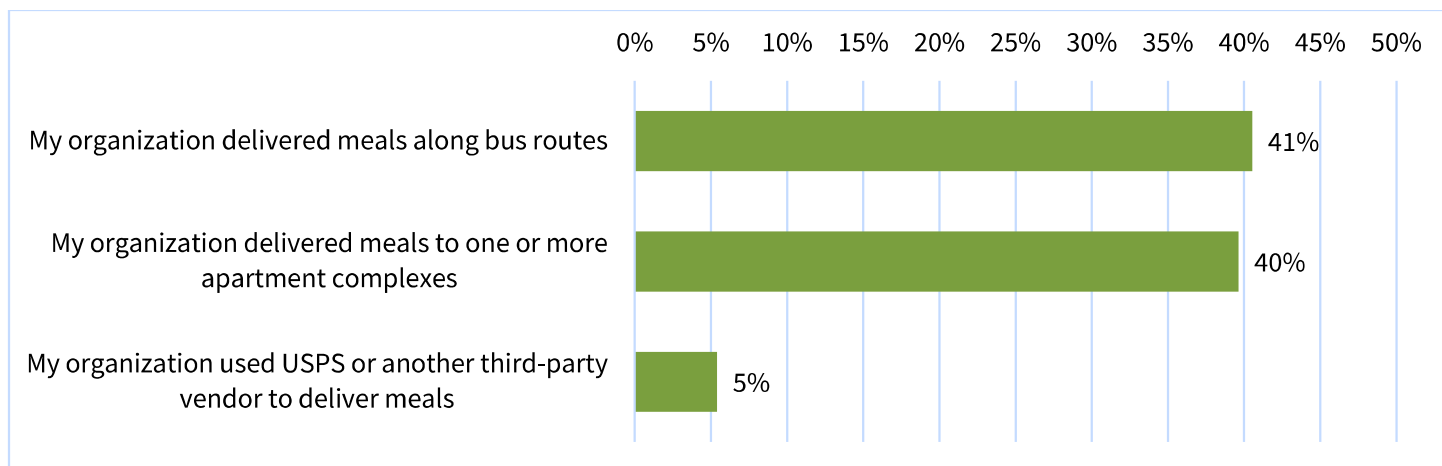
<sup>\*</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Questions S14 and S17; N=518; Respondents could select multiple answers.

## Meal Delivery

Sponsors were asked about three meal delivery practices in summer 2023: the use of third-party vendors, such as the United States Postal Service or a meal delivery provider; meal delivery along bus routes; and meal delivery to apartment complexes. Sponsors may have used other practices that were not included in the survey.

Among the 111 respondents that delivered meals, only 5 percent reported use of a third-party vendor (Figure 10). The most common practices were delivery along bus routes (41 percent) and to apartment complexes (40 percent). Nearly one third of meal delivery sponsors (32 percent) did not report using any of these practices.

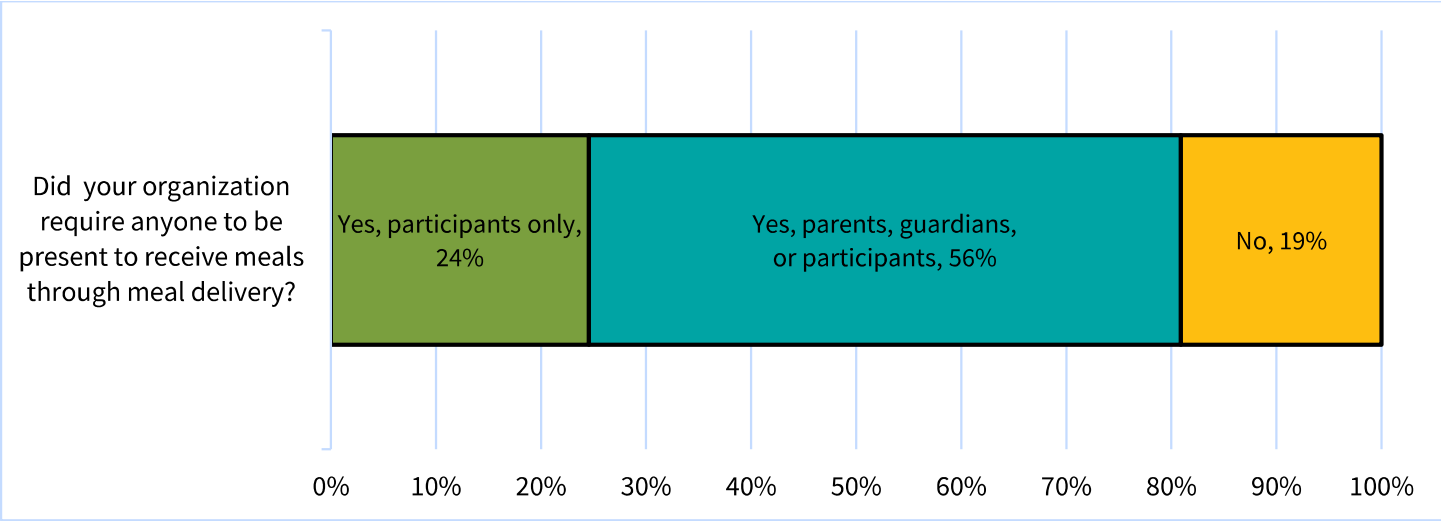
**Figure 10. Practices among sponsors of non-congregate meal delivery services<sup>xi</sup>.**



<sup>xi</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Question S15 and S18; N=111; Respondents could select multiple answers.

Sponsors were also asked if someone needed to be present to accept meals when they were delivered. Nineteen percent said there was no requirement for anyone to be present to receive delivered meals (Figure 11). While the majority (81 percent) indicated someone had to be present, most commonly that could be the participant or a parent or guardian. About a quarter required participating children to be present.

**Figure 11. Proportion of sponsors of non-congregate meal delivery service who required someone to be present to receive delivered meals<sup>xii</sup>.**

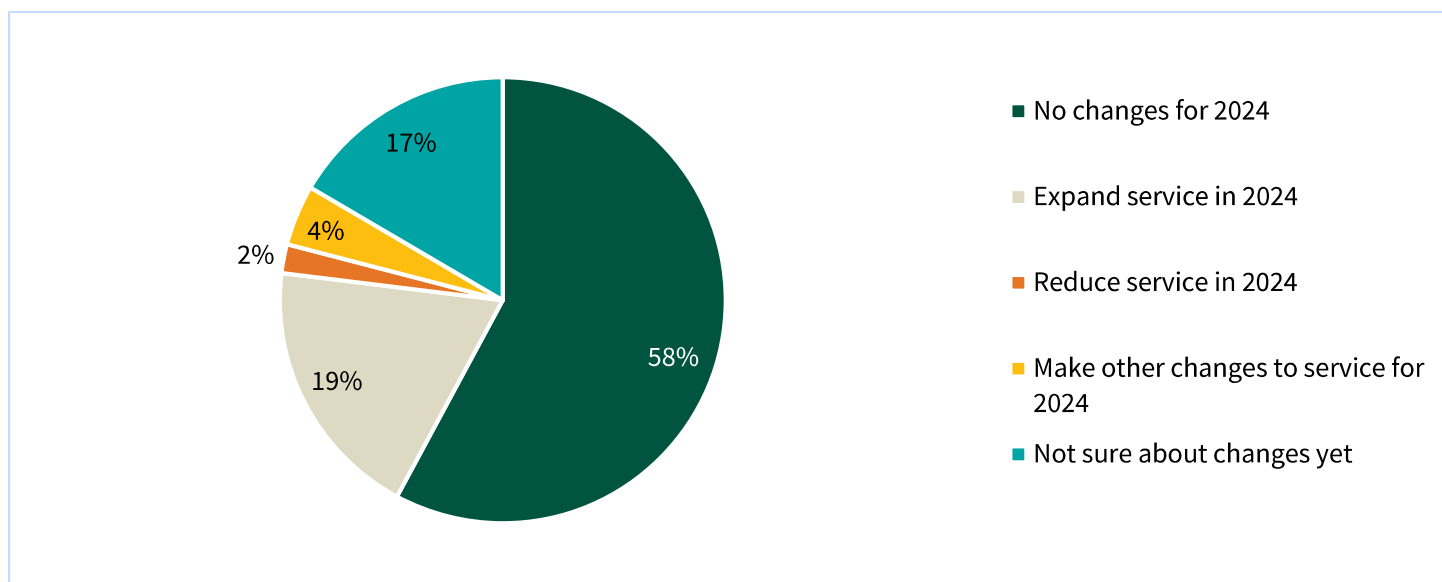


<sup>xii</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Questions S12, S16, and S19; N=111; 1 missing response (1 percent).

## Plans for 2024

Most respondents (86 percent) planned to serve non-congregate meals in Summer 2024 (Figure 12). Most returning sponsors do not plan to make any changes to the way they provide non-congregate meals in Summer 2024 but nearly one-fifth of them plan to expand service. Another fifth knew their organizations would be providing non-congregate meals in Summer 2024 but were unsure if their service models would change or not.

**Figure 12. Plans of sponsors who expect to provide non-congregate meal service in Summer 2024<sup>xiii</sup>.**



<sup>xiii</sup> Source: 2023 Summer Non-Congregate Sponsor Survey, Questions S21 and S22; N=477

One in ten survey respondents were unsure if their organization would provide non-congregate meals in Summer 2024. Only 20 respondents indicated they do not plan to participate in non-congregate meal service again in summer 2024. Of these, thirteen respondents indicated that they would be providing congregate meal service during summer school and would therefore be ineligible to provide non-congregate meal service at the same site. The remaining seven respondents indicated that they would not be participating in SFSP or SSO at all in 2024 due to changes in area eligibility or staffing issues.

## Conclusion

Overall, sponsors of summer non-congregate meal service sites in 2023 viewed the program positively, indicating that they were able to provide more meals to more children at a cost less than or equal to congregate meal service. All sponsors used the meal service type flexibility (meal pick up or meal delivery). Most sponsors used at least one of the other flexibilities (parent/guardian pick up, multi-day meal issuance, bulk food distribution) and had previous experience with USDA summer meal programs and/or with non-congregate meal service. Pick-up sites were the most common method of distributing non-congregate meals in Summer 2023 and most sponsors planned to provide non-congregate meal service in Summer 2024.