






NCA Member Advocacy Survey Report



February 2023

Over the past year, CACFP (USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program) sponsors and providers have continued to face challenges to keep their programs viable. Sponsors and providers continue to work tirelessly to serve nutritious meals and snacks as operations move toward a new normal. Efforts such as the COVID-19 flexibilities and increased reimbursement from the Keep Kids Fed Act have helped tremendously, but as these flexibilities end and the additional funding is no longer available, sponsors and providers worry about being able to continue to participate in the CACFP.

Overall, survey respondents indicated the following as top priorities:

-  Increased reimbursement
-  Making the area eligibility waiver for Family Child Care Homes (FCCH) permanent
-  Supporting the recommendations of the “USDA Report to Congress: Reducing Paperwork in the CACFP”
-  Making the area eligibility waiver for At-Risk Afterschool (ARAS) permanent
-  Allowing At-Risk Afterschool to operate year-round

An overwhelming majority of survey respondents, 95%, believe that increasing reimbursement rates is a priority. Many reported struggling with the skyrocketing cost of food and supply chain shortages. In a USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) study published in October 2021 regarding CACFP meal costs, the median total cost of food and labor was: \$4.19 per breakfast; \$4.85 per lunch; and \$2.94 per snack (USDA, 2021). These costs far exceed current reimbursement rates.

The continuation of the area eligibility waiver for Family Child Care Homes, allowing all providers to be paid Tier I rates, is a crucial priority. Many sponsors voiced their concern that should the Tiering system be re-implemented, many of their providers will drop off the program. Additional comments reiterated respondents' desire for the tiering system to end, as it would reduce paperwork, free up staff time, and help retain providers.

Over 80% of respondents support the recommendations of the “USDA Report to Congress: Reducing Paperwork in the CACFP”, which includes a number of strategies to help reduce the paperwork burden and expand access in the CACFP. Providers commented that the increased paperwork requirements, along with insufficient reimbursement, “was not worth it.” Both sponsors and providers expressed the need for streamlining program requirements and asking for state agencies to work to find ways to reduce the paperwork requirements.

A majority of respondents, especially those who reported working in the afterschool space, supported allowing At-Risk Afterschool to operate year-round (92%) and making the area eligibility waiver permanent for ARAS (91%).

Regarding feedback on the available COVID-19 flexibilities, over 85% of survey respondents reported using at least one COVID-19 waiver. Of those that reported using the COVID-19 flexibilities, most reported them to be useful or critically useful for their operations (91% waiving area eligibility, 88% off-site monitoring, 76% meal-time flexibility, 69% non-congregate feeding, 67% parent/guardian meal pick-up).

When asked whether they would support making any of the COVID-19 flexibilities permanent, most respondents overwhelmingly supported permanently waiving area eligibility in both Family Child Care Homes (90%) and in At-Risk Afterschool programs (95%). Over half of survey respondents answered that they would like to see off-site monitoring allowed in all circumstances. A majority of respondents answered that they would also support flexibilities for non-congregate feeding (54%) and parent/guardian meal pick up (60%), but only in certain circumstances.

To ensure the nutrition security and equitable access to nutritious meals and snacks, we must work together to strengthen and streamline the CACFP. The National CACFP Sponsors Association (NCA) urges:

- Congress to make the reimbursement increases and area eligibility waiver for Family Child Care Homes in the Keep Kids Fed Act permanent.
- Congress to include vital CACFP policy priorities in Child Nutrition Reauthorization.
- USDA to allow off-site monitoring flexibilities.
- USDA and State Agencies to streamline paperwork requirements to reduce administrative burden on providers and sponsors.

“We will lose up to 1/3 of our providers if/when the tiering changes back to split tiering, which could put our sponsorship in jeopardy financially. Make it a priority to keep the single Tier reimbursement rates!”

“The reimbursement rate is too low overall and many Tier 2 providers don’t see the value/worth of joining. This would help incentivize more providers to join. This waiver has helped us retain and recruit new providers since it has been in place.”

About the Survey

This survey is an effort by the National CACFP Sponsors Association (NCA) to obtain feedback on policy issues and COVID-19 flexibilities from CACFP sponsoring organizations and provider members. The survey collected data and open comments from 267 NCA members in multiple operational segments of the program from December 9 to December 19, 2022. The survey was targeted at CACFP Sponsors and Providers. Other CACFP stakeholders who attempted to take the survey, were not moved forward, such as State agency staff and Nonprofit Associations (that are not sponsors). The results of this survey will be used to help shape the advocacy efforts for NCA.

Survey Results

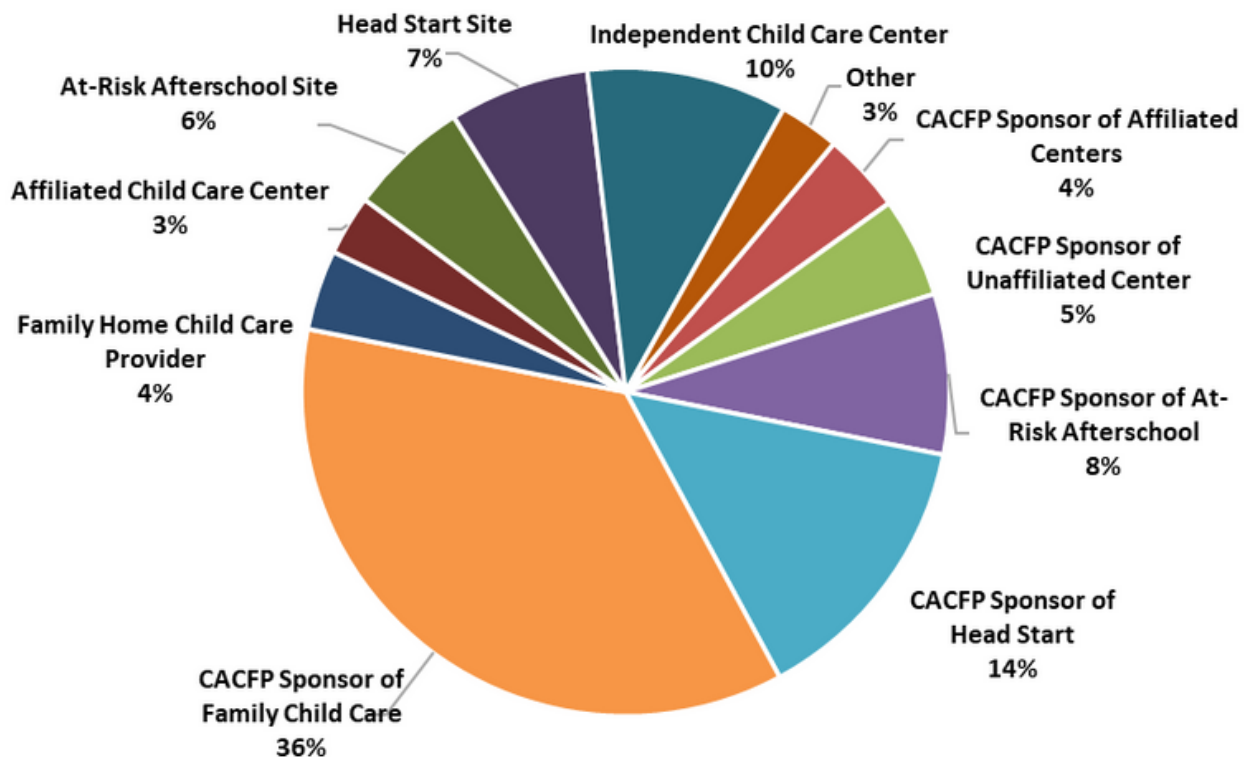
Demographic Data

Of the 267 survey respondents, 67% identified themselves as working for a CACFP sponsoring organization while the other 33% identified themselves as working as a CACFP provider. As sponsors make up approximately two-thirds of the responses, overall results may skew towards the priorities of sponsors as compared to those of providers.

Over half of those who identified as sponsors worked for Sponsors of Family Child Care Homes, 20% as Sponsors of Head Start, 12% as Sponsors of At-Risk Afterschool, 8% as Sponsors of Unaffiliated Centers, 6% as Sponsors of Affiliated Centers, and only one respondent worked for a Sponsor of Adult Care.

Of those who identified as a provider 30% worked for Independent Child Care Centers, 20% as Head Start Sites, 17% as At-Risk After School Sites, 12% as Family Child Care Homes, 9% as Affiliated Child Care Centers, 6% as Food Banks, 2% as Adult Day Care Sites, and only one respondent worked for a Tribal Nation.

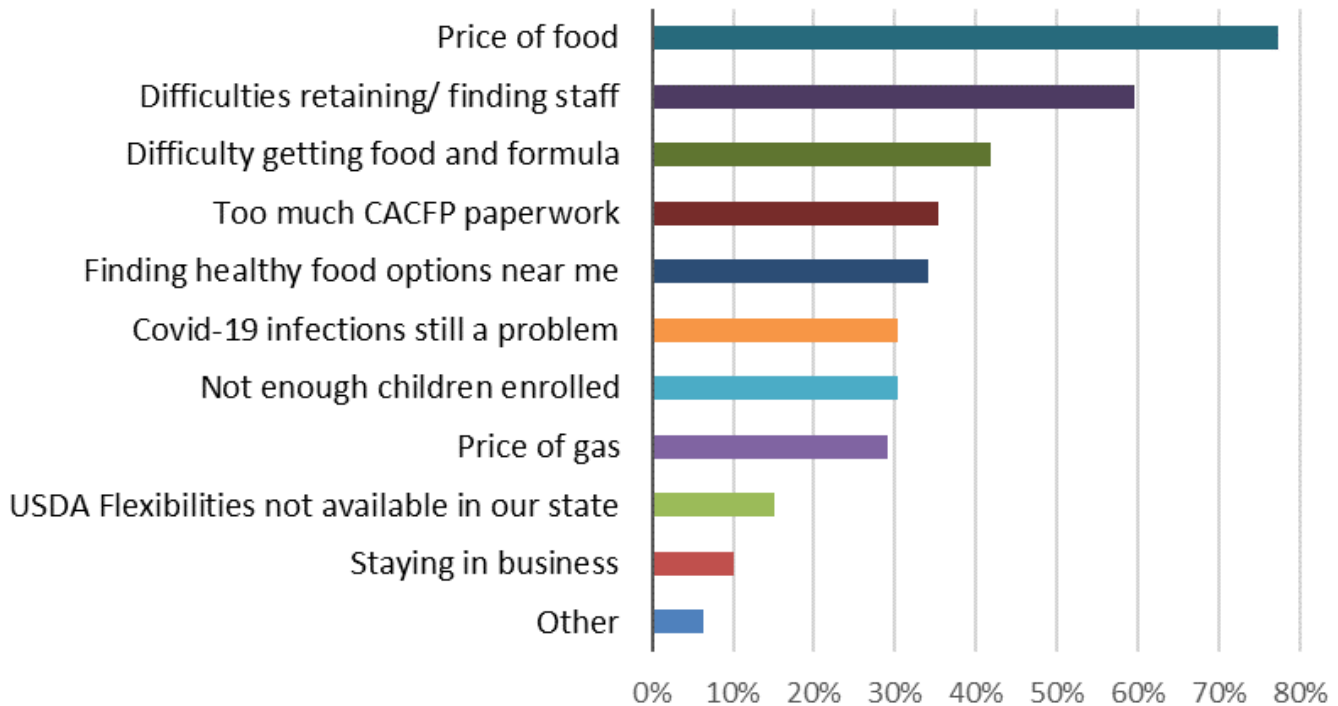
Figure 1: Survey Respondents by Type of CACFP Sponsor or Provider



Main Issues Facing CACFP Providers and Sponsors

NCA asked providers and sponsors to identify what issues they are facing today. In general, they indicated high cost of food or the inability to get CACFP creditable foods as issues. Finding and retaining staff continues to be an issue for both sponsors and providers, as are the paperwork requirements of the CACFP.

Figure 2: Top Issues Facing CACFP Providers

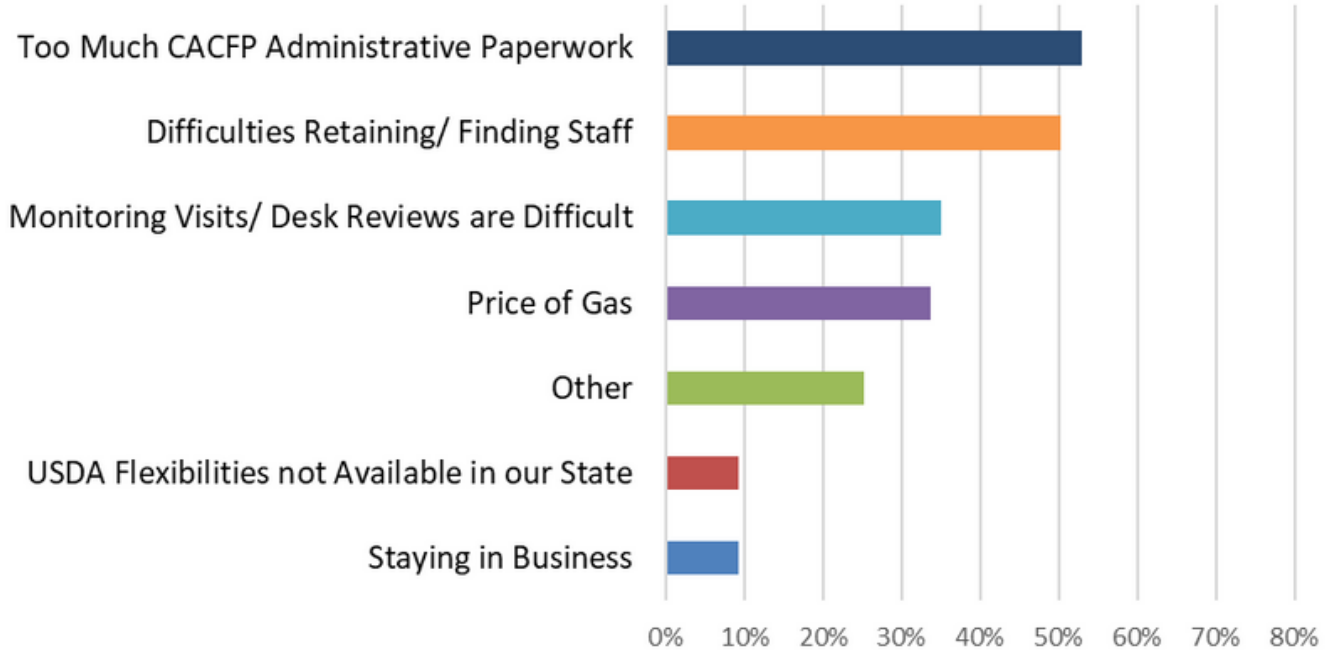


It is clear that the price of food and staff shortages are much greater concerns for providers compared to other challenges they may be facing. Ten percent (10%) of providers are worried about staying in business. Of those facing issues with staying in business, most were Independent Child Care Centers.

"Regardless of home income; price of food is outrageous for ALL. EVERY person is feeling anxious."

"As a large afterschool program, we do not always have the time and staff coverage to create, prep, and/or cook the snacks."

Figure 3: Top Issues Facing CACFP Sponsors



Sponsors, like providers, reported difficulties finding and retaining staff and as consistent with the rest of the survey are burdened with the CACFP paperwork requirements. Other issues identified by sponsors, not listed in the survey, include high food prices along with supply chain shortages. Similar to providers, 10% of sponsors, most of which are sponsors of Family Child Care, are facing issues with staying in business.

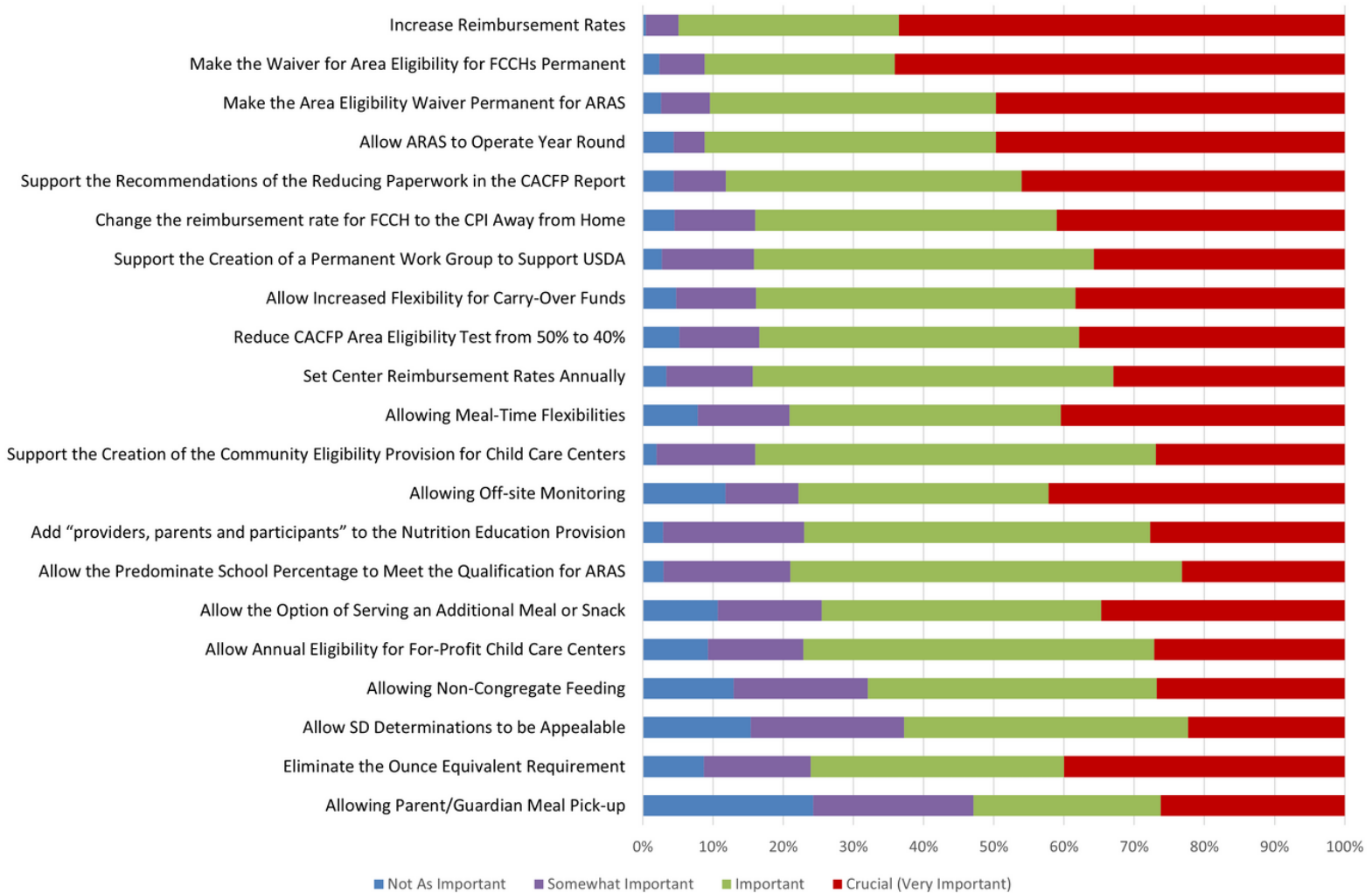
"I believe the program is a great asset to our facility. If it weren't for the program, I don't know if we could make ends meet. But, sometimes it's very difficult to find people willing to learn the program and keep up with paperwork, etc. Covid, although not as 'severe' anymore, has made its way through the facility several times, causing us to lose days open because of spread. It's just a difficult time to operate right now. I'm not sure there is anything, besides an increase in funding that would help us make things easier."

Policy Priorities Member Feedback

NCA asked respondents to rate the importance of the several CACFP policy priorities. While we analyzed the top five priorities overall and of several subgroups, it is important to note that over half the respondents rated almost all priorities as important or crucial. In general, increased funding continues to be a top priority in the CACFP, either through increased reimbursement or expanded program access. Over 95% of respondents believe that increasing reimbursement rates should be a priority, 64% finding it crucial and 31% finding it important. No respondent answered “not applicable” to the question regarding increasing reimbursement rates.

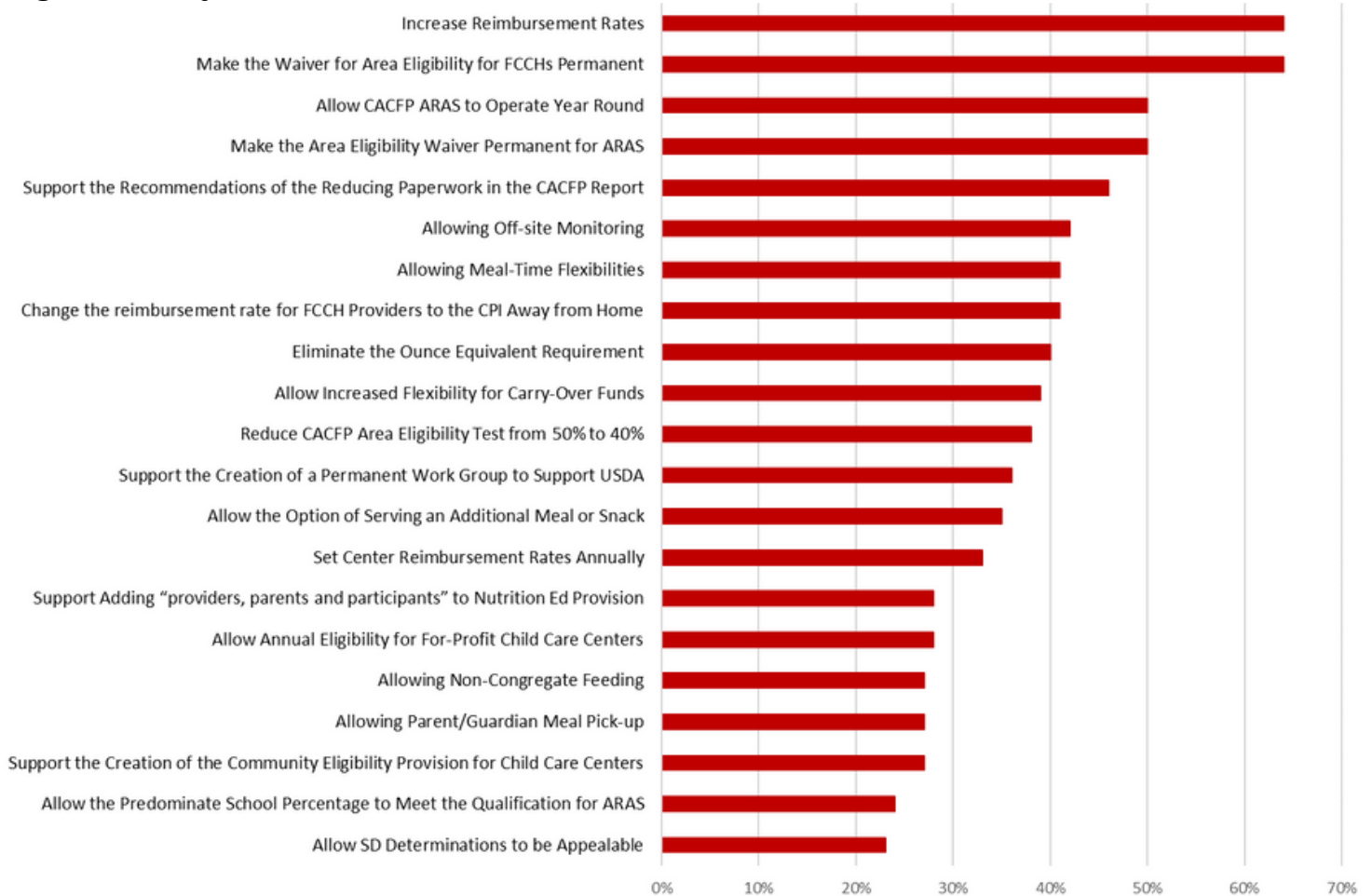
Almost 90% of respondents believe that supporting the recommendations of the paperwork reduction working group as important (48%) or crucial (40%). The “USDA Report to Congress: Reducing Paperwork in the CACFP” recommends a number of much needed strategies to streamline paperwork in the CACFP and minimize the administrative burden on providers and sponsors.

Figure 4: The Importance of NCA Policy Priorities



When looking at only the priorities rated crucial by respondents, the most crucial priorities rated by all respondents are the same as the overall top 5 priorities. However, three other priorities were rated crucial by over 40% of respondents: allowing virtual (off-site monitoring), allowing meal-time flexibilities, and changing the CPI for family homes from “at-home” to “away from home.”

Figure 5: Policy Priorities Rated Most Crucial



NCA further analyzed the top priorities by several respondent sub-groups. Across respondent sub-groups, increased reimbursement rates and expanded eligibility ranked as their most important priority. Increased reimbursement was important/crucial to approximately 95% of respondents, but was more crucial to providers (76%) than sponsors (58%). Also, highly important among most sub-groups was supporting the recommendations of the “USDA Report to Congress: Reducing Paperwork in the CACFP”, indicating the need to address the increasing paperwork burden of the CACFP on both providers and sponsors.

Among stakeholders of FCCH sponsors and providers, “Making the waiver for area eligibility for FCCH permanent” was their number one priority. FCCH sponsors are concerned that once the Keep Kids Fed Act expires at the end of June many providers that have to return to Tier II reimbursement will simply go off the program. This will directly affect the viability of sponsoring organizations.

Among the subgroup that included At-Risk Afterschool stakeholders, it was not surprising that “Making the Area Eligibility Waiver for ARAS permanent” and “Allowing ARAS to operate year-around” were amongst the most important priorities. In addition, while none of the priorities in the permanent flexibilities category were in the top priorities for the general respondent population, non-congregate feeding and meal-time flexibilities were ranked number 5 and 6, respectively, for ARAS respondents.

Several sub-groups had CACFP program expansion priorities rated as most important. For example, a top priority for FCCH providers/sponsors was the reduction of the area eligibility test from 50% to 40% and a top priority of Independent Child Care Centers and Sponsors of Unaffiliated Centers was the creation of the community eligibility provision for child care. Head Start providers and sponsors also rate meal-time flexibilities highly. Providers expressed the need for meal-time flexibility in certain circumstances such as when a child arrives late (transportation issues).

"As we anticipate an end of flexibilities, we expect that it will place a burden on our site staff who are still dealing with the lasting effects of the pandemic."

"Even in non-pandemic times, allowing flexibility in mealtime allows family home providers to play outside longer, take a longer nap, etc."

COVID-19 Flexibilities

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of waivers were issued by USDA to offer various flexibilities and temporary program expansion to help continue to feed children nutritious meals and snacks. Overall, respondents expressed gratitude for these flexibilities.

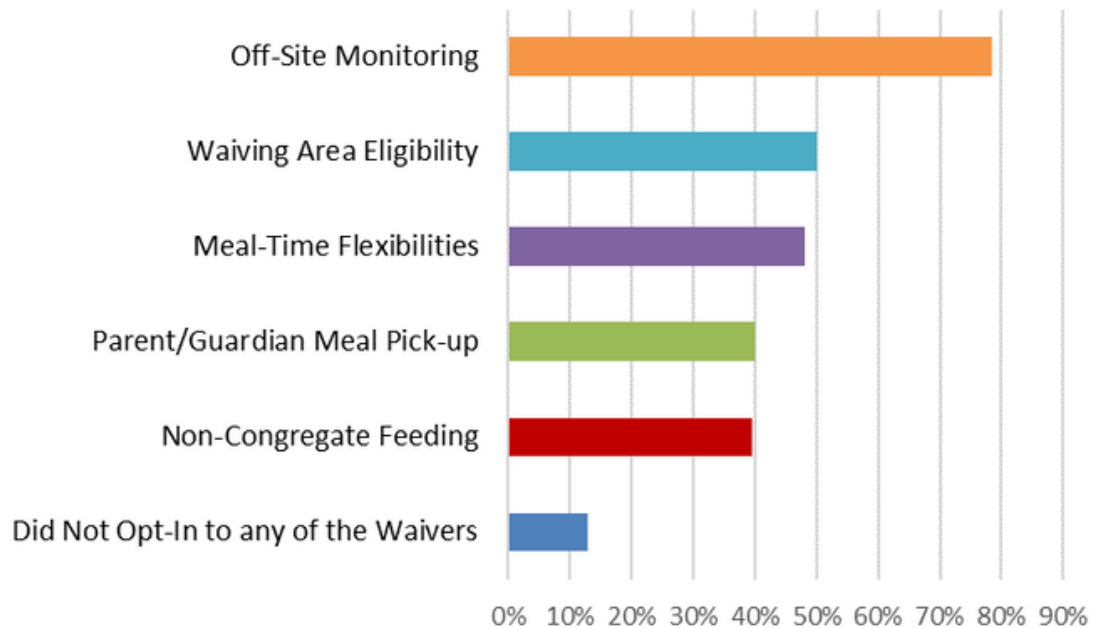
COVID-19 Waiver Use

Respondents were asked to identify which COVID-19 waivers they have used at any point during the pandemic. Only 13% of respondents did not opt-in to any COVID-19 waivers. The rest of the respondents (87%) reported using at least one of the available waivers. An overwhelming majority of respondents (78%) used off-site monitoring waivers and half of respondents used area eligibility waivers. In addition, 48% of respondents reported using the meal-time flexibilities waiver, 40% used the parent/guardian meal pick-up waiver, and 40% used the non-congregate feeding waiver.

The most used waiver for ARAS respondents was non-congregate feeding (80%), followed closely by waivers for meal-time flexibilities and parent/guardian meal pick-up (both used by 73%).

Eighty-eight percent of Family Child Care Home providers reported participating in off-site monitoring because of the waiver. Almost 75% of FCCH providers reported using the area eligibility waiver.

Figure 6: COVID-19 Waiver Use



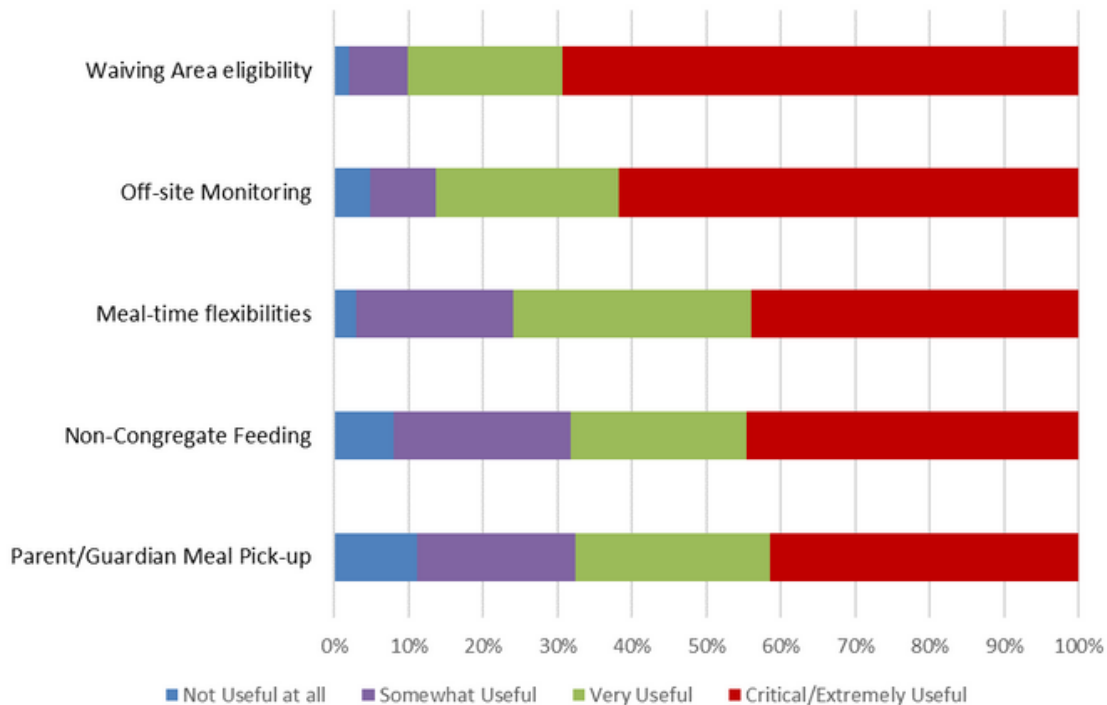
Reasons for Not Using COVID-19 Flexibilities

Respondents were asked to provide the reason they did not opt-in to each individual waiver. The most common reason for not using each of the COVID-19 waivers is because it wasn't needed (40-60%) or they never heard of it (15-30%). Sponsors' top reason for not using each waiver is because it wasn't needed (40-70%), while the top reason for providers was that they had never heard of the waiver (30-50%). Only between 10-20% of respondents listed their reasoning for not using each waiver as either the waiver not being available to them or the waiver being too burdensome.

Usefulness of Waivers

Respondents were also asked to rate the usefulness of the COVID-19 flexibilities. Overall, the majority of the respondents found all waivers to be useful/critical. The waiver found most useful by respondents was the waiver for area eligibility, with 70% finding it critical and 20% finding it very useful. Next, 63% of respondents found off-site/virtual monitoring waivers critical and 24% found them very useful. Approximately 45% of respondents found non-congregate feeding and meal-time flexibilities critical, and 41% of respondents found parent/guardian meal pick-up to be critical.

Figure 7: Usefulness of Waivers



"Off-site monitoring helps address several challenges. As a statewide sponsor when we have staff vacancies virtual monitoring allows us to stay in compliance. Some allowance of virtual monitoring also saves us a significant amount of mileage costs and allows our staff to support more providers, thus saving expenses even if costs are outpacing reimbursement and paperwork stays as-is."

Making Waivers Permanent

In most instances, when asked whether they would support making any of the COVID-19 flexibilities permanent, a majority of respondents answered that they would, but only in certain circumstances. However, for off-site monitoring, more respondents (50%) answered that they would allow off-site monitoring in all circumstances. A large majority of respondents said they would support permanently waiving area eligibility in Family Child Care Homes (90%) and in At-Risk Afterschool programs (95%).

Figure 8: Should Off-Site Monitoring be Permanent?

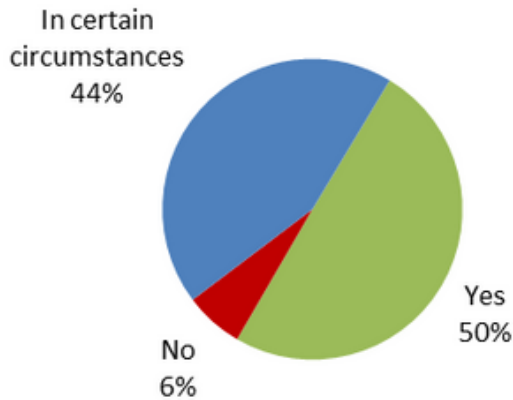


Figure 9: Should Area Eligibility in FCCHs be Permanently Waived?

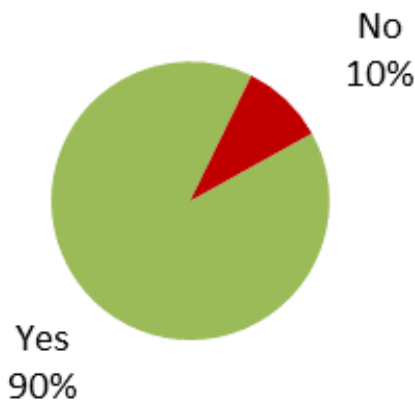
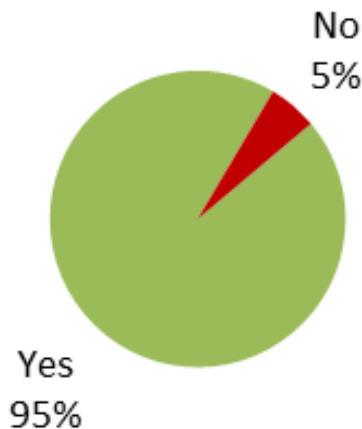


Figure 10: Should Area Eligibility in ARAS be Permanently Waived?



"Having the off-site monitoring option has kept us an agency a float. We just do not have the staffing to support the in-person visits for every visit. It has been a challenge to retain staff at the salary offered with the current job requirements."

"This is crucial. There will be a mass exit of good quality providers next year when all the area eligibility waiver ends and they have to go back to tier 2. With the high cost of food, they will find tier 2 rates not worth the paperwork."

"We saw significant need/participation at ARAS/SFSP sites who participated under the area eligibility waiver that would have otherwise never been able to qualify."

Figure 11: Should Non-Congregate Feeding Options be Permanent?

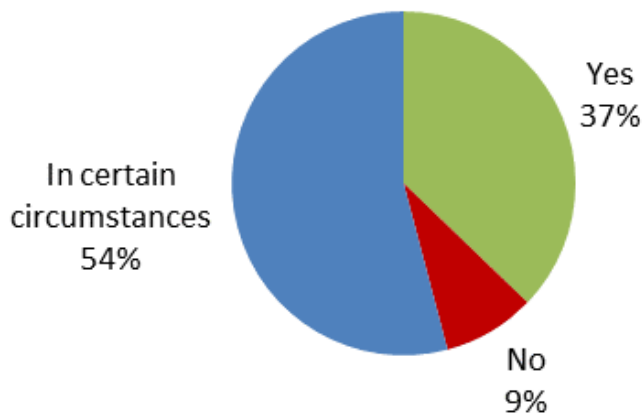


Figure 12: Should Meal-Time Waivers be Permanent?

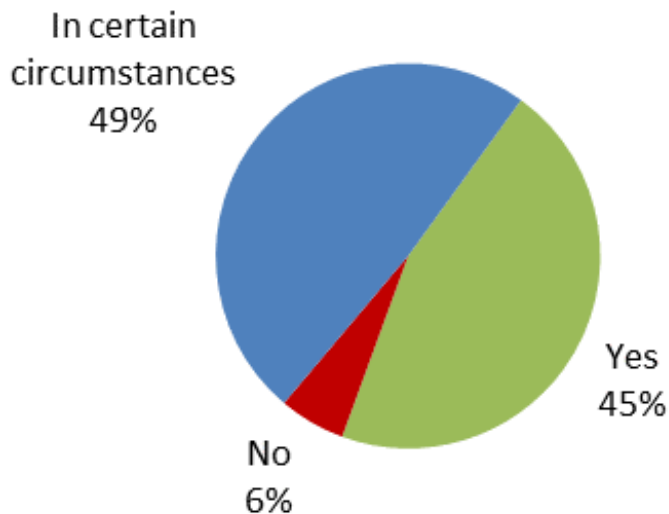
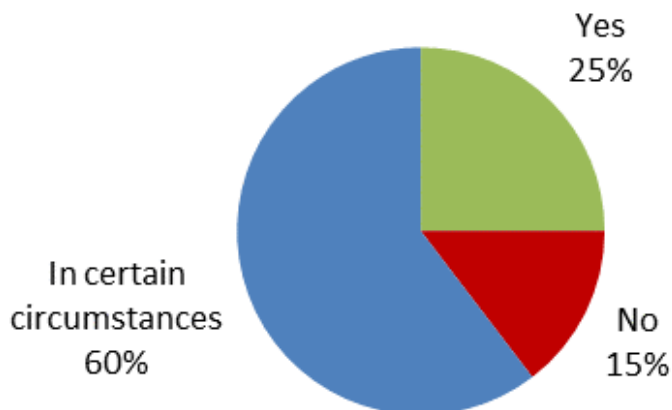


Figure 13: Should Parent/Guardian Meal Pick-Up be Permanent?



"Keeping the non-congregate feeding waiver ensures that more children are able to safely benefit from this important program, and site coordinators are able to have a little more flexibility to help keep both the children and the staff safe."

"By taking away just the meal time flexibilities, our participation across the board has gone down considerably."

"The non-congregate, parent/guardian pick-up, and are eligibility waivers were crucial in the first half of the pandemic. These waivers in particular allowed programs to reach children who otherwise would not have been able to get transportation or resources, especially when school was closed"

Conclusion

Important feedback was gained from our member survey, which NCA will incorporate into its FY23 & FY24 Advocacy Plan. We recognize that CACFP sponsors and providers continue to struggle financially, especially as many flexibilities and financial supports have ended (or will soon end). If measures are not put in place to address some of these well documented issues in the program, it is likely that we will see a decline in participation by providers, especially Family Child Care Homes, as well as a lack of sponsors to service rural areas and even some States. We can also expect that some sponsors and providers will either go out of business or will close. It is imperative to not only support, but invest in sponsoring organizations and child care providers. The CACFP helps ensure the nutrition security of our nation's most vulnerable population (young children and older adults) and investing in the CACFP assures better health outcomes in the future.

Acronyms

ARAS: At-Risk Afterschool Program
CACFP: USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program
CEP: Community Eligibility Provision
CPI: Consumer Price Index
FCCH: Family Child Care Home
NCA: The National CACFP Sponsors Association
SD: Serious Deficiency
USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

"Since we aren't able to charge for meals regardless of the family income, it seems unfair to reimburse at different rates based on family income."

"All children should be fed the same, regardless of ability to pay."

"Programs are working hard. They are providing quality childcare and it should be equitable across the board."

"In order to keep providers licensed we need to do away with the tiering, do better with the redundant paperwork and give more education and support to these home providers. They feel forgotten sometimes. They get frustrated and quit. We need good quality childcare homes as well as centers to allow parents to work."