



Successful Non-Congregate Meal Service Models for Rural Areas: Implementation Guide

In approved states beginning summer 2023, Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) sponsors can operate non-congregate programs in rural communities without access to a congregate meal site. For more information, check out USDA's guidance:

- [USDA's Implementation Guidance for Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#)
- [Q&A #2: Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#)
- [Offering Multiple Meals as Part of the Non-Congregate Meal Service](#)

This resource outlines effective models for non-congregate meal service. Use this guide to find strategies and tactics to execute a successful non-congregate summer meals program in your rural community. *Please reach out to your state agency to confirm the availability of non-congregate meal service and allowable models. Note: States are not required to make the non-congregate option available this summer. State agencies had to submit a plan to USDA for approval by April 1, 2023 to allow non-congregate meal service in summer 2023.*

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Definitions

Congregate meal service: Meals must be consumed at the site location. Note: children may take one fruit, vegetable, or grain item off-site for later consumption.

Non-congregate meal service: Meals are served to either children or caregivers on behalf of their child and can be consumed away from the site location.

Rural community: For summer 2023 operations, meals must be served in [rural areas](#) as defined by Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) regulations ([7 CFR 225.2](#)): (a) any area in a county which is not a part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area¹ or; (b) any “pocket” within a Metropolitan Statistical Area which, at the option of the state agency and with FNS concurrence, is determined to be geographically isolated from urban areas.

This [map](#) outlines metropolitan areas in purple. The areas not highlighted are deemed “rural” by USDA. USDA also allows for “pockets” of rural areas within purple metropolitan areas. Please work with your state agency to determine “pockets” of rural areas in your state. Sponsors can work with their state agency to determine “pockets” of rural areas in your state. No Kid Hungry has added additional layers to our [summer mapping tool](#) which shows areas that may be eligible as rural “pockets” upon state agency and USDA approval.

Access to a congregate site: Defined by state agencies. As guided by USDA, state agencies should consider information including but not limited to any physical conditions or other barriers; limited capacity of a congregate site that prevents it from serving the community at large; sites serving the same children on different days, different weeks, or for different meals on the same day; and sites appealing to specific age groups or to children with unique dietary requirements. *Find more information in [USDA’s Implementation Guidance for Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#).*

Eligible individuals: Individuals eligible to receive free summer meals include children and teenagers aged 18 and younger. Individuals aged 19 years and older who are enrolled in school programs for persons with disabilities may also receive free summer meals. *Note: In this resource, the term “children” will be used to broadly refer to all individuals eligible for free summer meals.*

Considerations for Non-Congregate Meal Service

For all non-congregate meal service models:

- Both sponsors of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) may provide non-congregate meal service in states approved for summer 2023 non-congregate operations in rural areas.
- Non-congregate meal service can only be used in locations that are considered rural and without access to a congregate site. See definition of “rural” above.
 - Sponsors should work with their state agencies and FNS Regional Offices to identify rural “pockets” or rural areas within a [Metropolitan Statistical Area](#).

¹ A Metropolitan Statistical Area is defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as a location where there is at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more population, plus adjacent territory, which has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties, based upon census data. Current delineations are based on 2010 standards. OMB plans to publish delineations of areas based on the 2020 standards and 2020 Census data in 2023 for use in summer 2024.

Considerations for Non-Congregate Meal Service (cont.)

- Sponsors can utilize both congregate and non-congregate meal service models. For example, sites in eligible communities can serve congregate meals Monday through Friday and non-congregate meals Saturday through Sunday. Or if a program only offers an in-person lunch service, children can consume lunch on-site and take home a breakfast for the following day.
- Up to two meals, or one meal and one snack, per child, per day may be offered (in any combination except lunch and supper). *Please reference USDA's guidance: [Offering Multiple Meals as Part of Summer Non-Congregate Meal Service](#)*
 - With state agency approval, sponsors can distribute up to 10 calendar days of meals at one time.
- Meal service times must be established and approved by your state agency. Approved pick-up schedules or delivery plans may meet this requirement.
 - Unlike congregate meal service, sponsors operating non-congregate sites are not required to serve breakfast in the morning or allow one hour between the end of one meal service and the start of the next.
- Meals may be distributed to caregivers to take home to children using a process to ensure eligibility of children.

Please reference [USDA's Implementation Guidance for Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#), [Q&A #2: Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas](#), [Offering Multiple Meals as Part of the Non-Congregate Meal Service](#), and any additional state-level guidance for more information about offering non-congregate meals.



Meal Distribution Models

Choose a model or mix of models that work best for your sites, staff, and community.

Drive-thru or curbside pick-up

In drive-thru or curbside pick-up models, the majority of families arrive by car to receive meals. Families drive up to the pick-up spot, and the meals are loaded into their cars outside. This model is best for meal programs planning to distribute multiple meals at one time. It also is ideal for communities with one or multiple easily accessible, central locations where meal distribution can take place. Multi-day meal packs result in a larger quantity of food leading to heavy boxes or bags, and a drive thru or curbside model accommodates the large quantity of food.

Things to consider:

- Caregivers or families may stay in their vehicles while receiving meals. Some families may prefer this to remain more anonymous.
- Establish a distribution point that allows for a line of waiting vehicles without backing up onto the street.
- Think about weather conditions. Consider purchasing a tent and other inclement weather gear for your staff.
- Sites should use clear signage – in multiple languages, as applicable – to advertise the availability of free summer meals.
- Offer a separate line for families that walked to the site or used public transportation. Consider offering smaller bundles of meals or loaning grocery carts for the summer.

Walk-up distribution

In this model, meals are available for pick-up at one or multiple central locations. Locations can be indoor or outdoor. Individual meals or multi-day meal packs are provided to children or caregivers on behalf of their children with this grab and go model. Walk-up distributions are ideal for communities with easily accessible central locations by public transportation, car, or walking. It is also ideal when fewer meals are provided at one time to accommodate those walking or taking public transportation.

Things to consider:

- If offering multi-day meal packs, consider offering smaller bundles or lending grocery carts to families walking or using public transportation.
- Remember to think about weather conditions. Consider purchasing a tent and other inclement weather gear for your staff. Or, provide your meal service indoors.
- If sites are indoors, be sure to clearly identify where people should go to receive the meals. Outdoor sites should also use clear signage to advertise the availability of free summer meals.

Meal Distribution Models (cont.)

Mobile route distribution

In mobile, non-congregate models, sponsors use a vehicle to travel to multiple site locations. Similar to congregate mobile models, non-congregate mobile routes are ideal in areas where families face transportation difficulties and in rural communities. Sponsors utilizing non-congregate mobile routes may be able to add more site locations to routes because vehicles do not need to wait for meals to be consumed.

Things to consider:

- This model works well for individual meals and multi-day meal packs.
- For schools, consider utilizing a known schedule for bus routes to identify stop locations and optimal routes.
- Select accessible locations near where families live, like parks, housing communities and apartment complexes.
- Apps and websites like [Here Comes the Bus](#) and [Where's the Bus](#) can be used by families to track where the bus or vehicle is along the meal service route. This prevents families from missing meal distributions if the vehicle is running early or late.

Direct home delivery

Direct home delivery works best for multi-day meal distributions by saving sponsors time and resources necessary for individual deliveries to families' homes.

Things to consider:

- Mail, delivery service, or hand-delivery is allowed in this model.
- Home delivery requires signed consent from the parent or caregiver.
- Sponsors eligible for operating home delivery are school food authorities (SFAs) and community-based sponsors.
 - Community-based sponsors must establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with an SFA in order to use the school's student data to identify and invite eligible students to home delivery.
- Sponsors must confirm the household's current contact information and identify the correct number of children in each household.
- All students within an area-eligible service area are eligible to receive home-delivered meals and may be invited to participate. If the service area includes non-area eligible locations, then the student must be determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals in order to receive home-delivered summer meals.
- With approval, meals for multiple days may be delivered at one time once the number of eligible children in the house has been verified and daily maximums are kept (i.e. no more than one breakfast and one lunch per child per day).

No Kid Hungry is gathering stories from across the country. Read about how these organizations made non-congregate summer meals a success in their communities:

[Lowcountry Food Bank, Charleston, South Carolina](#)

[Missoula Food Bank & Community Center, Montana](#)

Meal Distribution Logistics

Regardless of model, consider the **equipment or supplies** needed for success.

- Outdoor sites:
 - Shade via pop-up tents or other shelters
 - Rain gear
 - Access to restrooms (for curbside and walk-up models)
 - Indoor option for inclement weather
- Meal transport:
 - Vehicle with hot and/or cold storage (if necessary)
 - Carts or rolling racks
- Meal storage:
 - Adequate refrigerator and/or freezer space
 - Coolers, thermal bags, and Cambros to maintain food temperature
 - Tip: If dealing with limited storage capacity, put only the items that need to be kept cold or hot in the cooler bags or Cambros. Keep the rest at room temperature and then unitize as needed for service.
 - Large plastic totes or milk crates to store meals or meal components
 - Thermometers

Consider the **staffing needs** for your distribution model.

- If low on staff, recruit volunteers or staff outside of your department to support meal distribution and help manage traffic.
- High school and college students are often looking for summer work opportunities or volunteer hours. Hiring young adults may also make your site more approachable to children and teenagers.
- Check out these staffing resources from No Kid Hungry to learn more!
 - [Hiring & Retaining Staff: Your Most Precious Commodity \(webinar recording\)](#)
 - [Staffing Up: Strategies For Working Through Labor Shortage Challenges](#)
 - [Tips For Staffing Summer Meals Programs](#)

Meal Distribution Logistics (cont.)

Be strategic with **meal service times** and the **number of meals provided**.

- If permitted by your state agency, distribute meals for more than one day at one time to ease transportation barriers families may face.
- If this requires too much storage or staff capacity, have different pick-up or delivery days for different areas or locations served by the same central kitchen.
- Meet the needs of children with working caregivers who are unable to come during narrow timeframes during the day. Offer extended hours on certain days or an evening pick-up time rather than just an hour or two around midday.
- Allowing families to pre-order can help you be more accurate with meal prep. Consider a designated time for families to pick up online orders before the time promoted to the general public.

Communication

Ensuring the community knows about your program is critical to reaching children and teens with nutritious summer meals.

- Post clear and up-to-date information on your website. Include information like:
 - Time and location
 - How many meals will be distributed at once
 - The menu
 - Guidance on allergies and special dietary needs
 - Your organization's contact information
 - Whether children need to be present, or if a child does not need to be present, what information or documentation is requested to verify that the adult is the parent or guardian of an eligible child
- Consider using text message or robocall services to reach families.
- Use social media to promote the availability of meals and share updates. Consider paid advertising to target and expand promotion.
- Provide information to the local news media to help promote the availability of meals and sources of information for details and updates.
- Post clear signage and information at sites to help children and families locate the exact place and procedures for meal pick-up.
 - Consider large banners or signs to direct people to open sites.
 - As needed, post multiple signs with arrows directing vehicles and families to the right location, or use sidewalk chalk or tape for sites with walk-up distribution.

Download and customize social media graphics, template letters to families, banners, flyers, and more with No Kid Hungry's [Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#).

Partnerships and Additional Services

Partnerships can help expand and enhance your summer meals program by offering programming and additional services. Even though children do not have to consume their meals at the meal site, you can still offer enhancements to attract participation.

- Libraries may offer their traveling bookmobile or donate books for children and teenagers participating in the meal program.
- High school students or undergraduate students may be interested in volunteering or in internship/job opportunities with your organization. They can help serve meals and play with kids during the meal distribution.
- Provide fun activities for children and families with your meal distribution. Small things like sidewalk chalk, stickers, or crayons and coloring books can go a long way to make meals more fun.
- Reach out to nutrition education providers like your local SNAP-Ed agency to see if they would be interested in providing services at the site or resources in the meal bags or boxes.
- Health centers and physicians' offices can offer free health screenings or support applying for Medicaid and community health programs.
- Organizations that provide Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application assistance can offer their services alongside meal distribution.
- Work with a food bank or pantry to distribute groceries or other household supplies to caregivers and families during the same time that meals are being distributed.
- Post or provide information about other resources or support services that may be available in your community, or provide the number for the National Hunger Hotline: 1-866-3 HUNGRY and 1-877-8 HAMBRE (1-866-348-6479 and 1-877-842-6273). The hotline refers people in need of emergency food assistance to food pantries, government programs, and other organizations.

Don't forget to share this resource with a friend or coworker!

