RESEARCH ARTICLE

Serving Summer Meals During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of 2 Summer Food Service Program Sponsors in Maryland

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides free and nutritious meals to children under age 18 during out-of-school times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Maryland sponsors served over 9.5 million meals to children through an expanded version of the SFSP. This study aimed to explore and compare the factors that enabled 2 SFSP sponsors in Maryland to dramatically increase meals distribution during the pandemic.

METHODS: Sponsors were selected based on their responses in the larger study and demographic characteristics of the area in which they served. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted over Zoom—4 interviews with Sponsor A (3 interviews with the sponsor, 1 interview with their vendor) and 1 interview with Sponsor B. Qualitative data were analyzed inductively and deductively. Participation data from 2019 and 2020 were obtained from the Maryland State Department of Education and analyzed.

RESULTS: Despite their differences in organization type and geographic region, they identified similar facilitators to their success—communication with the community and utilization of the United States Department of Agriculture-issued waivers.

CONCLUSIONS: Strengthening community communication networks and permanently integrating more flexibility into regulation of the SFSP may increase meals participation during future out-of-school times.

Keywords: school meals; child nutrition; COVID-19; summer nutrition program; nutrition policy; USDA waivers.

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Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 14.7% of households with children in Maryland experienced food insecurity. The proportion is estimated to have risen to 43% in summer 2020 due to economic instability caused by the pandemic. During the school year, schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide nutritious meals to children living in low-income households at free or reduced prices. These federal child nutrition programs decrease the prevalence of household food insecurity among children who participate. However, during out-of-school times, such as summer or mandated closures, children lose access to these healthy meals, thus increasing their risk of experiencing food insecurity. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) aims to fill this gap by providing low-income children with free meals during the months of June, July, and August.
The SFSP helps families stretch their summer food budgets and decreases their risk of experiencing food insecurity. In March 2020, many states across the country mandated school closures due to pandemic-related concerns. Consequently, over 900,000 Maryland children lost access to school meals, approximately 384,000 of whom were enrolled to receive free- or reduced-price meals. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented nationwide program waivers that allowed schools and community-based sponsors to serve meals year-round through the SFSP. Additional waivers were implemented to provide operational flexibilities to address pandemic-related concerns, including allowing sponsors to serve meals outside of the standard meal times (breakfast, lunch, supper), permitting parents/guardians to pick up meals without their child present, allowing for meals to be taken and consumed off-site, and serving meals in any location regardless of area-income.

Understanding sponsors’ experiences during the pandemic may elucidate new and longstanding barriers to SFSP operation and participation. Quantitative studies of the impact of the pandemic and pandemic-related waivers on SFSP operations and participation exist, however, they do not capture the context and circumstances experienced by sponsors who run the programs. This study aimed to explore the factors that enabled 2 SFSP sponsors to exponentially increase their number of meals served during the pandemic. Case study methodology was used to further understand the real-life experiences and explore the context-specific impact of the waivers as perceived by SFSP sponsors. The findings from this case study may help sponsors in other states to replicate the success of these models and may inform advocacy efforts for policies that will allow program flexibilities to extend past the pandemic.

METHODS

Sampling and Case Selection

This case study is part of a larger mixed-methods evaluation assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SFSP sponsors’ operations and experiences in Maryland. The larger evaluation analyzed monthly SFSP meals participation data from summer 2019 and 2020 collected by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). In summer 2020, all Maryland SFSP sponsors were invited to complete an online survey that asked about the impact of the pandemic and the waivers on their operations and experiences. Sponsors’ survey responses were linked to their 2019 and 2020 SFSP meals participation data. Sponsors who completed the survey were asked to indicate their interest in participating in an in-depth interview (IDI) to discuss their experiences. Details about the development and components of the survey and interview guide for the larger study are described elsewhere (Lu et al., unpublished data, 2021).

The larger evaluation identified 3 SFSP sponsors in Maryland that increased meal distribution by over 3000% between 2019 and 2020 (Figure 1) (K. Harper et al., unpublished data, 2021). The authors selected 2 of the 3 sponsors to participate in the case study because they participated in the larger study and represented different sponsor types (public school and faith-based) and geographic regions (rural and urban). Below, we will refer to the urban, faith-based sponsor as “Sponsor A” and the rural, public school sponsor as “Sponsor B.” Additional IDIs were conducted with the sponsors selected for this case study and demographic information were obtained from publicly available local- and national-level population databases.

Procedure

Semi-structured IDIs for the case study we conducted from September 2020 through February 2021 with the food service director from each sponsor plus the meal vendor for Sponsor A. Meal vendors are organizations contracted to prepare and sell meals to sponsors that do not have the capacity to prepare their own meals. Sponsors are not required to work with meal vendors and some sponsors prepare their own meals in-house, as is the case for Sponsor B. Therefore, no additional interviews with Sponsor B affiliates were conducted.

In total, 4 interviews were conducted with Sponsor A (3 shorter interviews with the food service director and 1 interview with their vendor) and 1 longer interview was conducted with Sponsor B (Table 1). Interview guides for the case study interviews included open-ended questions informed by sponsors’ responses to the survey and previous IDIs to further explore facilitators and barriers to meal distribution and opinions on future policy recommendations for the SFSP. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription agency. Transcripts were verified against audio recordings by a researcher.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The codebook from the larger study, described elsewhere (Lu et al., unpublished data, 2021), was used to develop the preliminary codebook for this case study. Group-coding of 2 transcripts was performed by 3 authors to reach consensus on codes, definitions, and application of the codebook for the case study. The remaining transcripts were double-coded among the 3 authors to ensure inter-coder reliability. The authors kept memos and met to discuss and resolve discrepancies throughout the coding process. After the
Table 1. Characteristics of Sponsor A, Sponsor B, and the State of Maryland

| Characteristic                      | Sponsor A | Sponsor B | Maryland |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Sponsor type                        | Faith-based | Public school | —        |
| Number of sites in 2020             | 4         | 13        | 1107     |
| Average daily participation in 2020 | 22,528    | 4585      | 401†     |
| Total number of meals served in 2019| 52,256    | 8982      | 3,073,200|
| Total number of meals served in 2020| 1,934,364 | 299,298   | 9,512,530|
| Percent change in total number of meals served between 2019 and 2020 (%) | 3602 | 3232 | 210 |
| Race/ethnicity (%)                  |           |           |          |
| Non-Hispanic white                  | 71        | 88        | 50       |
| Black or African American           | 18        | 4         | 31       |
| Hispanic/Latine                     | 4         | 4         | 11       |
| Median household income*            | $86,655   | $96,769   | $84,805  |
| Average housing density             | 1184 houses per square mile | 139 houses per square mile | —        |

*Median household income in 2015-2019 based on US Census Bureau data.
† Statewide median ADP.

Data were coded, the authors performed thematic and cross-case analyses to understand the experiences of each sponsor and identify similarities and differences between them. Interactive quote matrices generated by MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 version 20.4.1, Berlin, Germany were used to aid analysis.

RESULTS

Sponsor A

Description. Sponsor A is a faith-based organization with over 10 years of experience running the SFSP. In summer 2020, they had 4 open sites at private religious schools, all within 5 miles of each other and spread across 12-square-miles within their city (Figure 2). The residents in Sponsor A’s city are predominantly non-Hispanic white (71%); there are fewer black or African American (18%) and Hispanic/Latine (4%) residents. The median household income in this city is approximately $86,700 and 23% of the population are children under the age of 18. The average housing density in this city is 1184 houses per square mile.

Impact of COVID-19 on operations. Sponsor A increased their total meals served from 52,256 meals in summer 2019 to 1,934,364 meals in summer 2020 (3602% increase). The average daily participation (ADP) for Sponsor A was 22,528 in summer 2020, making them the fourth highest of all SFSP sponsors and the highest among non-profit SFSP sponsors in Maryland (in summer 2020, the median ADP in Maryland was 401). During summer 2020, Sponsor A utilized certain pandemic-related waivers to make adjustments to meals distribution operations and implement safety precautions for staff and families. For example, Sponsor A described a drive-through model where caretakers of children could pick up multiple days' meals.
worth of food at one time. Toward the beginning of the summer, they began serving boxes with enough food to last families 2 to 3 days. Over time, they transitioned to serving boxes that would last families 7 days. Sponsor A described convenience for both families and SFSP staff as the main reason for serving multiple-day boxes. Early in the pandemic, Sponsor A anticipated some parents would return to work in person and would be unable to come on site to pick up meals every day, so they brainstormed service models where parents could pick up more food in fewer trips. On the staff side, Sponsor A discussed the physical and emotional burden of serving meals every day and that their transition to 7-day boxes allowed them to operate on fewer days while continuing to meet the community’s needs. The vendor who worked with Sponsor A described:

“...It was hard. We went to every other day to rest our bodies a little bit. Then we eventually moved on to the 7-day package which seems to be working much better. A lot of work, a crazy amount of work, to get them packaged up in boxes and planning the menus exactly the way they’re needed.”

Facilitators of successful summer meals service. Sponsor A described that the most important facilitators of meal distribution during summer 2020 were community cohesion and strong communication channels (eg, WhatsApp, social media, school website). For example, Sponsor A worked with a local council member who helped them to quell tension with neighborhood residents due to traffic from distributing their food boxes. Sponsor A also emphasized the importance of online community engagement in helping them to spread the word about their summer meals and food boxes. Sponsor A explained:

“Our school advertises it on [their] webpage...[O]ther than that, somebody posts it [on social media] and says, ‘Hey, there’s a great box’, and it gets to [the community]. There’s no ‘official’

from our side. It’s not official social media. Our neighborhood is close-knit and people chatting on their WhatsApp groups are there.”

Another important partner was Sponsor A’s vendor. Sponsor A worked with 1 other staff member to run their SFSP sites; they relied heavily on assistance from volunteers to distribute the meals at their sites. Their vendor-provided assistance from approximately 30 additional people to help prepare and distribute the meal boxes. Their vendor was also key to their success with summer meals service during the pandemic when there were food supply chain concerns earlier in the pandemic. Sponsor A explained:

“Our vendor really stepped up because there’s a lot of packing that goes into it. He has a warehouse for packing... We’re doing a lot more cereal, big boxes in terms of, to get that into a box, canned items, frozen stuff, ready to go. We’re doing a lot more of that and he’s packing those boxes.”

Another important facilitator to their success was the USDA-issued waivers during the pandemic. Sponsor A perceived a positive impact of all the waivers on the SFSP, specifically for non-congregate feeding, mealtimes flexibility, and parent/guardian pick-up, stating:

“We wouldn’t be allowed to [serve meals] if we didn’t have the waivers [...] Those three waivers would have to exist to continue this program.”

Sponsor B

Sponsor B is a public school authority in a rural county with over 5 years of experience running the SFSP. In summer 2020, they operated 13 open sites at public schools, churches, libraries, and parks located 10-15 miles apart throughout their county (Figure 2). Sponsor B also delivered meals to students using vans and bus routes. Most residents in Sponsor B’s county are non-Hispanic white (88%), with fewer Hispanic/Latine (4%) and black or African American (4%) residents. The median household income in this county is approximately $96,800 and 22% of the population are children under the age of 18. The average housing density in this county is 139 houses per square mile.

Impact of COVID-19 on operations. Sponsor B increased their total meals served from 8982 meals in summer 2019 to 299,298 meals in summer 2020 (3232% increase). In summer 2020, their ADP was 4585. Sponsor B utilized the newly available waivers to make some meals distribution changes, including drive-through pick-up of meals by parents or caretakers, distribution of multiple meals for multiple days and home meal delivery. Sponsor B provided 3-day meal bags to children doing hybrid learning and
7-day meal bags to children doing fully online learning, noting that they believed that providing packages with multiple days’ worth of meals was enticing to parents because “it was worth their time.” Sponsor B also tried having buses drive their normal bus routes to distribute meals at sites closer to where families lived; however, they stopped this approach, noting that “the juice wasn’t worth the squeeze.”

**Facilitators of successful summer meals service.** Sponsor B believed communication about summer meals to families from school administrators and teachers facilitated their successful meals service. In particular, Sponsor B emphasized the trust families have in communication from the school, stating:

“Our email and the text alerts through our school messenger system are some of the best way we get word out to the parents… When [parents] get something from the principal, that would really make it peak.”

Sponsor B also shared an example highlighting the impact of school communication on their meals participation:

“Our largest day ever was [when] we did outreach before the spring or Easter holiday… That was one of the biggest days that we had a lot of outreach through the school-based folks. […] It was just so accessible. It’s so easy for people to go and do that pickup.”

During the summer, Sponsor B used their school’s “Essential Student Services”, a department dedicated to addressing unmet needs for their “most at-risk kids”, to help deliver more meals. Employees of this department were already delivering food and other school resources to hard-to-reach households in the county during the school closures, so Sponsor B partnered with them to deliver summer meals and meal bags at the same time. Sponsor B also worked with teachers at their school to ensure that children in non-English speaking communities received meals. These were partnerships that Sponsor B had not had in the past but were formed during the pandemic and impacted their ability to reach more children.

Prior to the pandemic, Sponsor B felt that the “tight regulations” imposed by the USDA were challenging for SFSP public school sponsors because of barriers such as minimal staffing, low budgets, and large administrative burden. Conversely, Sponsor B expressed that the USDA waivers made meals more “accessible and available” to children during the pandemic and supported the use of the waivers even after the pandemic was over. When asked about which waivers they believed should become permanent, Sponsor B said:

“[F]irst choice would be non-congregate, that they could take the meals home; [second] that you could do multiple meals in one day; and then probably third would be area eligible. Other locations could [do] the program without meeting some of those strict requirements. I think those are the huge barriers here.”

Specifically, Sponsor B felt that the area eligibility waiver was key to reaching historically hard-to-reach communities in their rural county. They explained that most of their county is on the edge of the income requirement (185% of the poverty line) and many “pockets” throughout the county needed support but were ineligible for meal distribution sites in previous years. In summer 2020, the income requirement was waived and they were able to serve in a variety of new places, such as areas with “a lot of farmers or rural school sites”.

**DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to explore the ways 2 Maryland SFSP sponsors overcame pandemic-related barriers to increase their meal distribution over 3000% from summer 2019 to 2020. Both sponsors had strong pre-existing online communication networks and engagement with their communities that facilitated their successful meals service despite pandemic-related restrictions, such as physical distancing and quarantining. Notably, the flexibilities afforded by the USDA SFSP waivers were critical to continuing safe meal distribution to children and families as the 2 sponsors found creative ways to serve meals that were not previously possible due to reimbursement restrictions. The sponsors identified the non-congregate feeding, parent/guardian pick-up, mealtime flexibility, and area eligibility waivers as most helpful in increasing and maintaining meal distribution throughout the pandemic.

Participation in the SFSP has historically been much lower than participation for in-school meal programs (eg, NSLP and SBP) partially due to long-standing barriers that prevent low-income children from accessing summer meals sites. For example, Sponsor B noted that transportation difficulties (eg, no car, no public bus) and long, unwalkable distances between households and meal distribution sites have always been challenges for their rural community members to access summer meals. Additionally, the eligibility criteria for establishing open meals sites require an area to have a population where over 50% of students are eligible for free- or reduced-price meals. This limits the reach of the SFSP, leaving many areas—particularly rural communities—of Maryland unserved. As schools pivoted their service models almost overnight, the flexibilities afforded by these waivers were critical to...
ensuring the safe continuation of meal distribution to children. At the same time, the waivers also removed or reduced long-standing barriers to SFSP participation. The experiences of the 2 sponsors in this study highlight the importance of the pandemic-related waivers in allowing sponsors the flexibility to serve meals to children in more convenient ways. This finding aligns with pre-pandemic findings highlighting the importance of waivers to SFSP operations and reducing burden on sponsors as well as findings from a quantitative study conducted by the USDA about facilitators and barriers to SFSP participation.

Limitations

This case study had some limitations. The 2 sponsors selected for this case study do not necessarily represent the experiences of all SFSP sponsors in Maryland or in the United States during the pandemic. For example, the median household income in these regions was higher than the median income for the state, which may impact the challenges related to serving meals and the success of online communication channels (i.e., wealthier communities may have better or reliable access to technology). These sponsors also had pre-existing communication structures and strong ties with their respective communities which aided their successful meals service, but these resources are not necessarily available to SFSP sponsors in other regions. Additionally, this study only investigated the perspectives of sponsors who substantially increased their meals distribution during the pandemic; we did not compare their experiences to those of sponsors who experienced dramatic decreases in meals distribution or who did not serve at all. Finally, we only interviewed the food service directors and 1 meal vendor, and therefore our results do not explore the experiences of the full meals service team (e.g., servers, janitorial staff).

Conclusions

To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore the direct experiences of SFSP sponsors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2 sponsors in this case study demonstrated exceptional success during the pandemic. Despite their differences in organization type and geographic region, they identified similar facilitators to their success—communication with the community and utilization of the USDA-issued waivers. The findings from this study expand our knowledge and understanding of the barriers, facilitators, and importance of community context to SFSP sponsors and their operations. Additionally, these results may inform state and federal policies regarding the expansion of waivers for the SFSP to increase meal participation during future out-of-school times.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

The need for school meals does not go away during out-of-school times; however, participation in the SFSP is historically lower than participation in the NSLP and SBP. For example, in July 2019 in Maryland, only 23 children participated in the SFSP for every 100 that participated in the NSLP during the previous school year. The dramatic increase in the number of meals served through the SFSP during the pandemic highlights this need for meals during out-of-school times.

Based on our findings, it may be helpful for SFSP sponsors to focus on developing strong ties with schools to support future outreach efforts for summer meals. Specifically, sponsors could implement community engagement strategies, such as clear communication channels or mobile meals delivery, to broaden their reach to children. Likewise, schools could coordinate with sponsors about advertising summer meals on school webpages and communication networks that directly reach parents. Sponsors could also collaborate with pre-existing school programs, similar to Sponsor B’s Essential Student Services that provide targeted services to at-risk students and integrate meals distribution into these plans.

Schools play an important role in child health and wellbeing year-round. The findings from this study highlight how crucial the SFSP is to providing nutritious meals to children when school is not in session. Thus, it is of utmost importance that all school districts nationwide consider implementing the SFSP. Additionally, schools that utilize the SFSP should request to their state agencies to opt into using all available federal waivers. Creating an open line of communication between schools, who implement the program, and state agencies, who are administrators of the program, may improve identification and problem-solving of specific needs and barriers to participation. This may ultimately increase awareness among state agencies regarding the importance of waivers to improve meals participation. Some schools do not or cannot implement the SFSP due to reasons such as not being in an area-eligible location. In these cases, schools could still help advertise summer meals sites by working with sponsors to share details of the programs with students’ families and help connect them to the closest meals sites available.

Human Subjects Approval Statement

This study was conducted according to the guidelines laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki and was considered exempt by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board (#00009727). Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants. Verbal consent was witnessed and formally recorded.
Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION
The following Supporting Information is available for this article:
Appendix S1. USDA-issued SFSP waivers which were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic (adapted from Harper et al., unpublished data, 2022).
Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.