

Lessons Learned: Examining the Impact of Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Waivers in Maryland During COVID-19



2021 Legislative Opportunities

The Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021 (S. 1530, H.R. 3115) would expand out-of-school time meal programs, ensuring every child has access to free nutritious meals year-round. This bill would eliminate the area eligibility test, allowing all communities to utilize SFSP. It also would allow sites to serve three meals and one snack per child per day during the summer, on weekends, and during school holidays.

The Summer Meals Act of 2021 (S. 1170, H.R. 783) also aims to improve nutrition in the summer months by including similar program changes such as lowering the area eligibility threshold and allowing all sites to serve three meals. This bill would also expand SFSP to allow nonprofit and local government agencies to provide meals year-round seamlessly and provide grant funding to support efforts to reach underserved areas.

Our Study

Beginning in summer 2019, researchers from Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health began collaborating with Maryland Hunger Solutions to investigate the impact of national waivers on the implementation of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in Maryland.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this study was expanded to assess the impact of emergency COVID-related waivers on SFSP participation as well as on the administration of the program by SFSP sponsors. Data were obtained from state reports, online surveys and in-depth interviews with SFSP sponsors. It is incredibly opportune that this study includes pre-pandemic, pandemic, and will include post-pandemic data and analysis. This brief highlights preliminary findings from this work.

Key Take Away

Program flexibilities provided by COVID-19 related nationwide waivers have reduced longstanding barriers to SFSP participation while simultaneously reducing the administrative burden on sponsors, increasing participation numbers and making the SFSP more efficient and effective in addressing food insecurity.

Research Shows:

During the school year, low-income children typically have access to free or reduced-price school breakfast and lunch during the school day. However, during out-of-school times, such as summer and winter breaks, food insecurity increases significantly due to the loss of these meals (1). Research shows that children who experience food insecurity are at a higher risk of having poor nutrition, reduced levels of physical activity, impaired cognitive development, and a higher prevalence of mood, anxiety, and behavior disorders (2). Summer meals help to minimize the harmful impacts of summertime food insecurity by providing nutritious meals that ensure children meet their dietary quality requirements during out of school times (3)(4). However, key barriers to accessing meals through SFSP include lack of transportation, limited meal site availability due to eligibility criteria, low program awareness, and unnecessary administrative burdens that limit the site sponsor's ability to serve meals.

Policy Recommendations:

The initial pre-pandemic study in 2019 showed that Maryland had lower meal participation compared to other states in the Mid-Atlantic region that utilized available federal waivers. When state legislation was introduced to compel the state to utilize available waivers, the state began to comply, and has utilized every available waiver since 2019.

Based on preliminary findings and the success of these waivers, it is recommended that the following USDA SFSP waivers issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic be made permanent:

- Non-congregate Meals
- Meal Service Time Flexibility
- Parent/Guardian Pick up of Meals
- Area Eligibility

By integrating these flexibilities into SFSP programming, long existing barriers to participation will be eliminated, allowing for improved access to healthy meals among low-income families, hard to reach populations, and chronically underserved areas.

What Maryland Sponsors Are Saying:

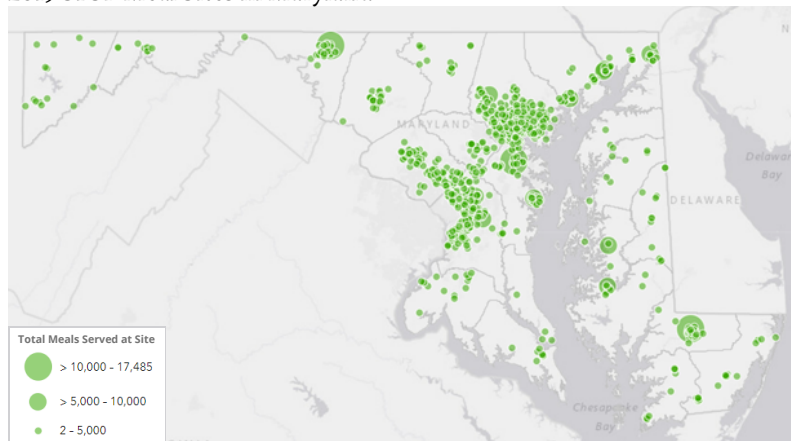
“I’d love to see some of those waivers potentially continue. I would love to see USDA have a continued and increased focus on how these legislative changes really affect our work on the ground. Looking at how much the waivers have helped our sites and also at how the waiver extension was given on the first day of CACFP, I think they’ve had a lot of opportunities this year to learn and get feedback and how it affects our programs.” **(nonprofit sponsor)**

“We were very appreciative of the waivers, to begin with because it made all the difference in the world, making all their sites when Maryland had all the summer food service sites could be zero percent. We couldn’t really have an enrolled site during that period of time. Having open sites made all the difference in the world to us.” **(public school sponsor)**

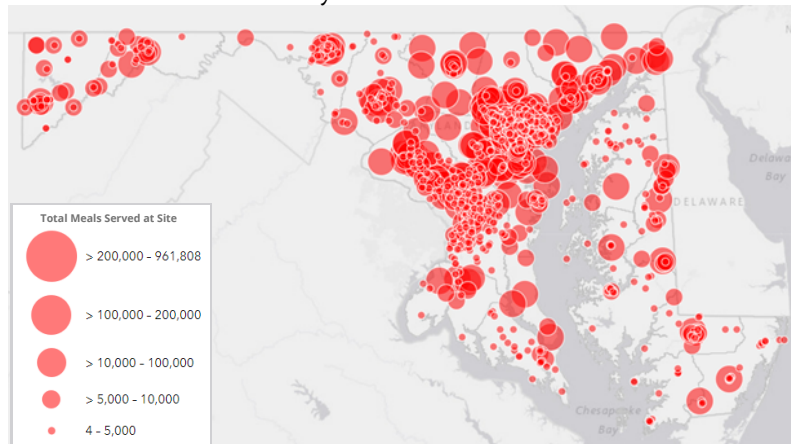
“All the waivers, in my opinion, gave us more accessibility to feed children. I don’t think any of the waivers came to us in a more restrictive manner.” **(public school sponsor)**

“The waivers have been extremely helpful, creating the flexibility for our sites to operate a program that they feel is safe and complies with public health recommendations.” **(nonprofit sponsor)**

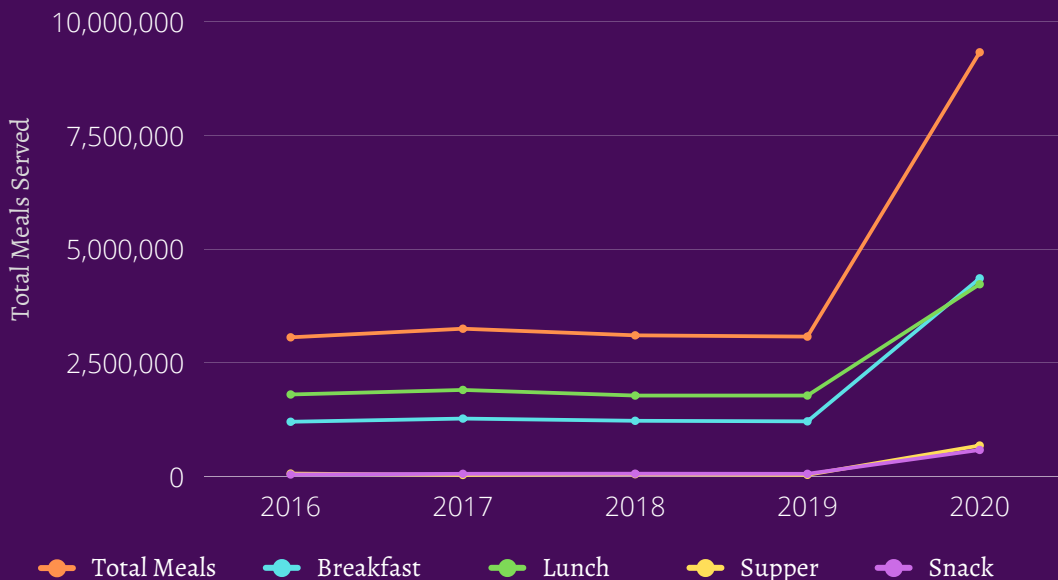
2019 SFSP Meal Sites in Maryland



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Total number of SFSP meals served in Maryland by category in June, July, and August from 2016 to 2020



The number of SFSP meals served in Maryland remained relatively consistent each summer with no significant change between 2016 -2019.

However, from 2019 to 2020, the total number of meals increased by 210% from 3,073,200 in 2019 to 9,512,530 in 2020.

This significant change can be attributed to the COVID-19 related program changes made through nationwide waivers, which not only allowed for more sites to serve meals, but also helped to remove long standing barriers to participation and increase the benefits experienced by participating families.

References: (1) Food Research Action Center. Hunger Doesn’t Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report. Frac.org. Published August 4, 2020. Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/FRAC-Summer-Nutrition-Report-2020.pdf> (2) Fram MS, Ritchie LD, Rosen N, Frongillo EA. Child experience of food insecurity is associated with child diet and physical activity. *J Nutr.* 2015 Mar;*145*(3):499-504. doi: 10.3945/jn.114.194365. Epub 2015 Jan 7. PMID: 25733465. (3) Kenney EL, Lee RM, Brooks CJ, Cradock AL, Gortmaker SL. What Do Children Eat in the Summer? A Direct Observation of Summer Day Camps That Serve Meals. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2017 Jul;*117*(7):1097-1103. doi: 10.1016/j.jand.2017.01.026. Epub 2017 Mar 17. PMID: 28330733; PMCID: PMC5484720. (4) Miller DP. Accessibility of summer meals and the food insecurity of low-income households with children. *Public Health Nutr.* 2016;*19*(11):2079-2089. doi:10.1017/S1368898016000033

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