



Summer 2011 Evaluation of Sites Sponsored by D.C. Department of Parks and Recreations: Successes and Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One in three households with children in the District of Columbia reported in 2009-2010 not having enough money to buy food that they needed for themselves or their family during the prior twelve months, making the District the state with the highest food hardship rate among households with children according to data collected by Gallup and analyzed by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)¹. For many families with children, this struggle intensifies during the summer months. For them, the end of the school year means they lose access to vital sources of balanced nutrition and healthy food like school breakfast and lunch, and afterschool snacks and suppers.

The D.C. Free Summer Meals Program addresses summer hunger by providing nutritious food to low-income children and teens at schools, community and faith-based programs, housing complexes, and recreation centers across the city. Federal funds cover the costs of providing food through this program. These funds are available for sites located in low-income areas of the city or serving a high percentage of children qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals. The District has continuously ranked as number one in the nation for the past seven years for reaching the most children with summer meals thanks in large part to the role the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) plays as the city's largest sponsor. In summer 2011, District of Columbia had 326 meal sites across the city; D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) sponsored 62 percent (or 202) of these sites.

While the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program ranks as the best summer food program, there are still areas for improvement. D.C. Hunger Solutions partnered with DPR to conduct a survey of DPR's sponsored meal sites. The survey asked a range of questions to identify program strengths and weaknesses with the goal of strengthening the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program. 37 percent of DPR's sites completed the survey.

The following survey results highlight the impressive achievements of DPR's administration of the program:

- An overwhelming majority of sites – 76 percent – have participated in the program for three years or more, and 16 percent indicated that this was their first year in the program.
- 95 percent of sites offer some kind of activity—such as a summer camp or academic enrichment—in addition to the serving of meals.
- 29 percent of sites operated the program for eight weeks or more – including 8 percent operating for over 10 weeks.
- 54 percent of the participating sites served at least two meals each day in summer 2011.
- 65 percent of sites served over 30 meals – including 15 percent of sites serving over 70 meals – each day in summer 2011.

¹ Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). http://frac.org/pdf/aug2011_food_hardship_report_children.pdf

- 96 percent of sites strongly agreed or agreed that they received adequate training from DPR before operating the program.
- 95 percent of sites strongly agreed or agreed that food arrived on time during designated meal hours.
- 84 percent of sites strongly agreed or agreed that the overall meal presentation was appealing this summer.
- 71 percent of sites strongly agreed or agreed with the statement *"children and teens enjoyed their meals."*
- 95 percent of sites plan on participating in the program again next year.

The survey results signify that DPR is doing an excellent job as a city-wide sponsor. Even so, there are several areas to target for improvements including:

- Encouraging more sites to expand the number of weeks participating in D.C. Free Summer Meals, the number of children and teens served, and the number of meals (e.g. breakfast and lunch) served each day.
- Offering more on-going training opportunities for sites to provide nutrition education and address operational issues.
- Building on the exciting food improvements by further assessing which foods are popular and identifying foods that can better meet the cultural and/or religious preferences of several sites.
- Connecting sites to the Afterschool Meal Program to continue feeding children nutritious food once school is in session.

The findings from this survey, as well as recommendations from D.C. Hunger Solutions, explore how DPR can build on its accomplishments to ensure the continued success of the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program. In the words of one site who responded to the survey, *"When you have 150 lunches and each one of them are being eaten, that right there tells you of how valuable the program is."*



About D.C. Hunger Solutions

D.C. Hunger Solutions, founded in 2002 as an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), works to create a hunger-free community and improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income people in the District of Columbia. To learn more about D.C. Hunger Solutions, visit www.dchunger.org.



D.C. Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2011, D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation sponsored 202 sites of the city's total of 326 sites that participated in the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program. D.C. Hunger Solutions surveyed DPR-sponsored sites in the summer of 2011 to help DPR improve even further its administration of the program. Surveys were sent, via email, to site supervisors (staff in charge of operating the meal service) at 202 sites with a 37 percent rate of return.

Through responses provided by 74 site supervisors, the survey results offer valuable feedback on the Department of Parks and Recreation's administration of the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program, including information on:

- The sites participating in the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program
- D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation's operation of the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program
- The quality and appeal of the food
- Interest in future participation in D.C. Free Summer Meals and other federal nutrition programs
- The importance of the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program to the community

SITE INFORMATION

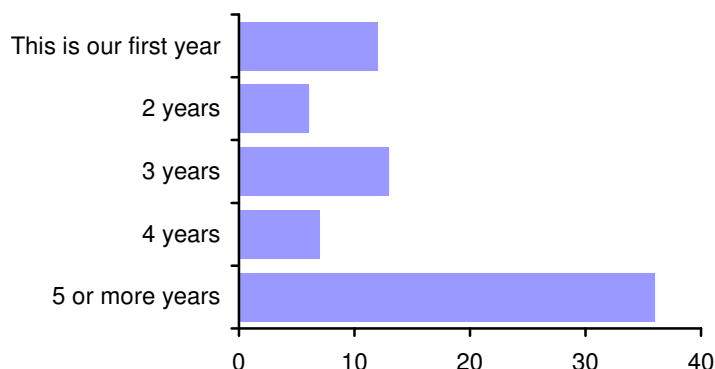
2011 budget cuts forced many summer programs and schools that had previously served as summer meals sites to close, threatening to leave many low-income children without sufficient access to summer nutrition. Keeping this in mind, D.C. Hunger Solutions and DPR worked not only to engage previous sites, but also to recruit new community organizations to become free summer meal sites.

The surveys returned indicate that a range of sites – including 29 community-based sites (e.g., YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs), 22 DPR recreation centers, seven faith-based, and six child development centers, five apartment complexes, and five schools—benefit from DPR's sponsorship. Sites also vary in terms of how long they have participated in the program, number of weeks they are open, how many meals each day they offer, and the number of meals they serve.

History of Site Participation

Of the 74 sites surveyed, 76 percent had participated in the D.C. Free Summer Meal Program for three years or more suggesting that sites find the experience a positive one. Thanks, in part to the outreach efforts of D.C. Hunger Solutions and DPR, 16 percent of sites responding to the survey indicated that this was their first year in the program.

Breakdown of responses from the 74 sites

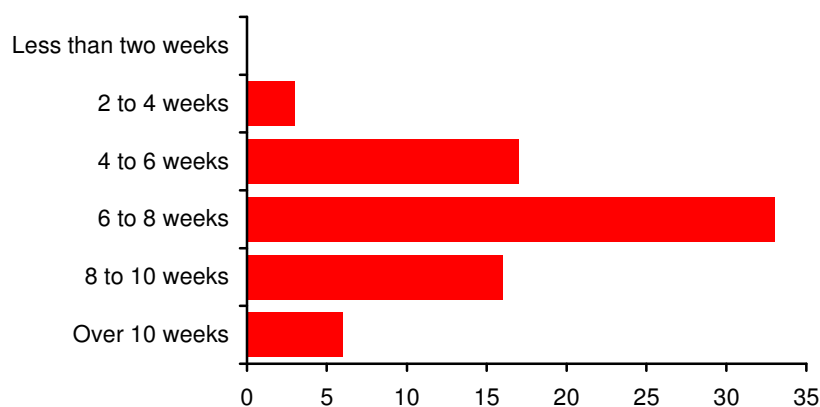


Number of Weeks Sites Are Open

A typical summer vacation in D.C. lasts ten weeks and children and teens need access to free summer meals throughout the entire summer. In previous summers, too many meal sites closed in late July or early August, leaving a gap between the start of the school year and the last remaining week(s) of summer vacation. To that end, D.C. Hunger Solutions and DPR partnered with six D.C. Public Libraries to ensure that these summer meal sites were open the week prior to the start of school – a week that historically has had fewer sites.

The survey results show 8 percent of sites opened for over ten weeks. 21 percent opened for eight to ten weeks; 44 percent opened for six to eight weeks; 23 percent opened for four to six weeks; and 4 percent opened for two to four weeks.

Breakdown of responses from the 74 sites



Summer Activities

Summer meal sites are not required to offer activities for children and teens; however, sites are encouraged to provide educational, enrichment and/or recreational activities as an extra “magnet” to draw in more children.

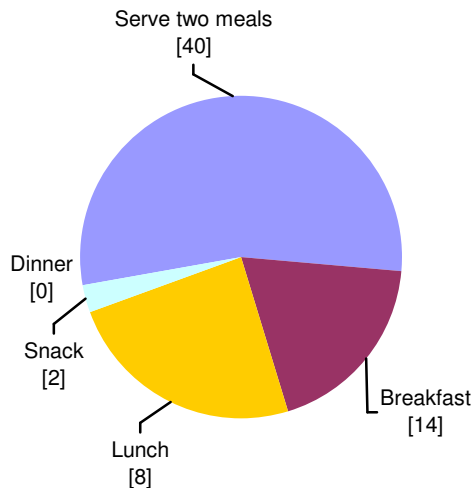
Ninety-five percent of the organizations that participated in the survey host other activities for the children eating at their sites. 43 percent run a camp; 12 percent provide academic enrichment; and 3 percent offer arts and crafts. Two percent offer either nutrition education or sports. 35 percent of participants offer other activities such as computer classes, educational field trips, music, book buddies, story time, dance, summer youth employment, job training, and swimming. By providing activities for the children, sites encourage more children to eat at the sites, help close the summer learning gap, and reduce the stigma of going to a site just to receive a free meal.



Number of Meal Offered Each Day

Under the Free Summer Meals Program, sites can serve up to two meals per day; lunch and breakfast, or lunch and a snack, breakfast and snack or breakfast and supper; lunch and supper is the only combination of meals not allowed. Sites are encouraged to offer two meals so children who rely primarily on the free meals during the school year will have the opportunity to eat at least two meals each day. 54 percent of the surveyed meal sites indicated offering at least two meals daily. 19 percent serve only breakfast, 24 percent serve only lunch and 3 percent serve only snack.

Breakdown of responses from 74 sites



Number of Meals Served to Children and Teens

Of the participating sites, 15 percent served over 70 lunches a day. 18 percent served between 50 and 70 lunches a day; 32 percent served between 30 and 50 lunches a day; and 32 percent served between 10 and 30 lunches every day. 3 percent were unsure of the number of meals served.

PROGRAM OPERATIONS

The results of the survey indicate that DPR has done an excellent job operating the program by providing adequate training and delivering the meals on time.

Training

The survey responses indicate that DPR is providing adequate training to meet the needs of sites: 96 percent of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "We received adequate training on how to operate a summer meals site". Three percent gave a neutral response and one percent strongly disagreed.

Timeliness of Meal Delivery

One of the most important roles of a sponsor is to ensure that food is delivered on time. Participating sites may judge the effectiveness of the summer meals program based on the timeliness of the meal delivery. DPR made it a priority to ensure that meals arrived on time to sites during designated meal times. Ninety-five percent of the participating sites strongly agreed or agreed that food arrived on time. Three sites expressed problems with food delivery at the beginning of the summer, but also reported improvements as the summer went on.

QUALITY AND APPEAL OF THE FOOD

Summer meal sites can choose to prepare their own meals or use a meal vendor. All DPR-sponsored sites received fully-prepared meals from the same vendor, thus eliminating any on-site meal preparation. During the summer of 2011, with a new vendor contract in place, DPR aimed to improve the nutrition and appeal of the meals. All meals comply with the enhanced nutritional standards of the D.C. Healthy Schools Act. The results of the survey demonstrate success with the roll-out of new meals.

Overall Meal Presentation

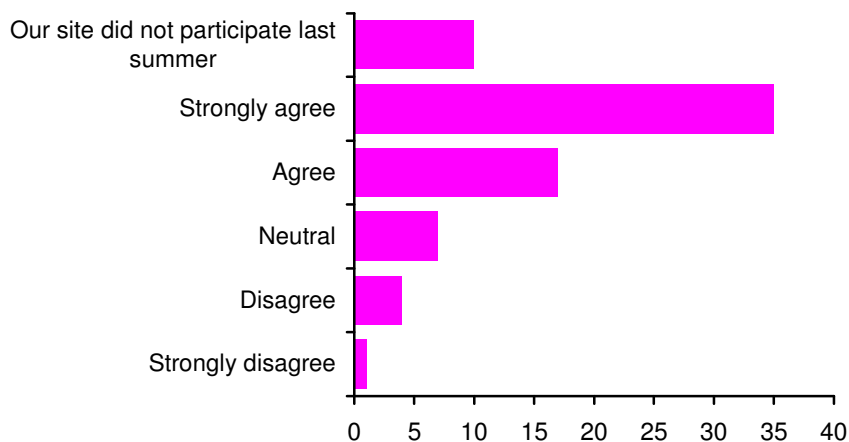
Presentation is critical when serving any meals. A common saying is that people “eat with their eyes” and a visually appealing food presentation can encourage children to consume more of the meal. DPR negotiated a new food vendor contract with a goal of improving the nutrition and appeal of the meals. Of the 74 surveyed participants’ sites, 84 percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “*overall meal presentation is appealing*”. Fifteen percent gave a neutral response, and one percent strongly disagreed.

While an overwhelming number of participants approved of the meal presentation those who disagreed commented on the packaging. Most specifically, they thought the lunches were too packaged and created excess waste.

Participant Enjoyment of Meals

The surveys indicate that sites, children and teens were satisfied overall with the meals; several sites commented on the noticeable improvements from years past. 70 percent of sites that had participated in the program in previous years also strongly agreed or agreed that the meal quality and variety had improved since last summer.

Breakdown of responses from 74 participating sites



When asked if the children enjoyed the meals, 71 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed, 27 percent gave a neutral response and two percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. At least six sites commented on how much the children loved the salads, particularly the chicken salad. The participants also had suggestions about how the meals could be improved. Many commented on the large number of wraps and expressed a desire for more variety. Three sites expressed concern for “cultural consideration”. For example, they wished to see more kosher and vegetarian/vegan food options. Overall, a majority of the sites were very pleased with the appeal and nutrition of the meals but expressed a desire for more variety.

FUTURE PARTICIPATION IN NUTRITION PROGRAMS

An overwhelming percentage of sites plan on continuing their involvement with the summer meals program, underscoring the success of DPR as a sponsor of the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program. Of the 74 surveyed sites, 95 percent plan to participate next year while the remaining four sites were unsure about their future involvement due to financial concerns.

Sites also indicated an interest in expanding their meal service to the weekends during the summer. When asked if they were interested in serving meals on the weekends during the summer, 20 percent of sites selected yes. Currently, DPR does not sponsor meal service on weekends.

Sites also expressed an interest in expanding their meal service during the school year. Almost all of the sites (74 percent) host some type of afterschool programming during the school year. Of the sites who host an afterschool program, only seven percent participate in the Afterschool Meal Program. However, 70 percent of sites are interested in participating in the Afterschool Meal Program.

RECOMENDATIONS

The results of this survey capture the excellent work of DPR in serving as the city's leading sponsor of the D.C. Free Summer Meal Program. Even so, there are few lessons to be learned from the results of the survey that could further strengthen the program as DPR and the city begin planning for summer 2012.

Structure of Program:

- While efforts were made to fill in any gaps in service dates through the recruitment of six D.C. Public Libraries, there is a need for further analysis of site coverage across the city to determine whether sufficient sites were open the entire summer, especially early August, when majority of summer meal sites end their program. This analysis should not be limited to DPR-sponsored sites but to sites across the city.
- While 95 percent of the sites offer activities, D.C. Hunger Solutions, DPR and Office of State Department of Education (OSSE) should continue to encourage site supervisors to connect with educational or enrichment programming and organize events or fun activities for kids eating at meal sites. Stakeholders should identify best practices and materials on positive youth development strategies to include as part of DPR's training.
- Based on the surveys, only one percent of sites offered any type of nutritional education to participants. DPR, supported by OSSE and nutrition education providers, should investigate more opportunities to infuse evidence-based nutrition education at sites to teach children about the healthy food they are eating. For example, sites could work with the SNAP Nutrition Outreach Program, administered by the D.C. Department of Health, to incorporate nutrition education ranging from cooking classes to something as simple as handling out recipes. Sites could distribute nutrition education materials such as brochures, posters and/or flyers. Creative nutrition activities can help draw in more children to sites.
- DPR should work to encourage sites to offer both breakfast and lunch, thereby bringing more nutritious meals to children and teens and drawing in more federal funding. Currently, only 54 percent offer two meals. Given the city's high rates of food hardship, more sites should be primed to offer two meals.
- DPR should help sites expand their capacity to serve more children, targeting the 32 percent of organizations that served between 10 and 30 lunches everyday to offer 50 or more lunches each day.

Summer Meals Program Operation:

- DPR should build on its successful training model by providing more on-going support to sites. Topics for additional trainings could include guidance and resources on operational issues like the operation of a sharing table, the handling of food waste, and opportunities to provide meals for adults through outside funding. Training also could be offered on effective nutrition education.
- DPR made significant progress this summer in improving the quality and appeal of meals. Moving forward, DPR should build on these successes by identifying ways to continue these improvements. DPR also should assess ways to increase the variety of foods, taking into consideration the cultural and religious background of D.C. residents.

Future Participation:

- DPR should investigate the feasibility of operating the program at selected sites during the summer on weekends.
- For sites that wish to continue serving healthy, nutritious meals after summer ends, DPR and D.C. Hunger Solutions should provide resources and support on how sites can operate the Afterschool Supper Program and investigate whether these sites can be sponsored or operate on their own.

CONCLUSION

The D.C. Free Summer Meals Program is a key building block in the District for improving health and reducing hunger through the provision of nutritious meals for children and teens. This survey highlights the successful work being accomplished by the Department of Parks and Recreation to ensure that all children continue to receive healthy, nutritious meals all summer.

It is clear from the survey results that the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program is vital to many organizations. Not only does it feed children during the summer but it also draws children to programs by providing healthy foods, and allows organizations to use their limited funds for additional activities by freeing up funding that was previously allocated for food. By maintaining the great work already being done and continually making improvements, the D.C. Free Summer Meal Program will continue to be an important resource to the District of Columbia.





IN THEIR OWN WORDS: STORIES FROM ORGANIZATIONS ON SUMMER MEALS PROGRAM

The survey asked participants to explain how the free meals program benefited their organizations. The range and depth of answers illustrate how important this program is to all organizations be it a recreation center, church, a library, or a summer camp.

- *The D.C. Free Summer Meals Program has truly been a great benefit to this community and the children. These meals that are provided are most of these kids' only meals. Most of the kids don't eat meals at home, so they look forward to these each and every day. I think the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program is an excellent program –* **T. Farmer, Langdon Park**
- *When you have 150 lunches and each one of them are being eaten, that right there tells you of how valuable the program is –* **H. Moton, Hillcrest Recreation Center**
- *TFCC is located in Potomac Gardens where 80 percent of our families are at or below poverty level. As such it is difficult for families to make choices of paying rent or buying food. We had a single mother of four small children, all elementary age. All four children attended our summer program. The mother could not make her food stamps last for the month and they often did not have adequate food in the home. We are happy to have the free food program to thank for allowing these children the opportunity to get a nutritious meal while in the summer program –* **G. Avent, Total Family Care Coalition**
- *We offer nutrition workshops in our camp and the food helped establish an understanding baseline of nutrition with the children. One child brought this baseline of nutrition home and returned with a story of how she helped her mom buy 'good' groceries that she liked but were still healthy foods. She was ecstatic that she was able to help her mom and still get foods she liked –* **Z. McKoon, Dance Institute of Washington**
- *In my opinion, the program introduces children/families to a balanced meals and new food types.–* **T. Woods, Jan's Tutoring House**
- *We have large families in this area where government assistance runs out after the 10th of the month, so these children are hungry and with the help of this program, these children are able to eat at minimum twice daily –* **S. Johnson-Denson, Barry Farm**
- *There is a family that has five children that attend our Summer Camp. They had often mentioned how they had little food in their home to eat. They are among the happiest children that we service each day. –* **K. Young, Wingate Towers and Garden Apartments**

