

SUMMER FOOD FOR CHILDREN DEMONSTRATIONS BACKGROUND

USDA has made a commitment to end childhood hunger by 2015. A key challenge is the problem of food insecurity in summer months when school is out and free and reduced-price school meals are not available to many low-income children.

One of the most important tools that State and Federal governments have to address this need is the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which enriches the lives of millions of low-income children during the summer, both by making nutritious food available and by providing resources that support summer education and recreation programs. USDA has a long history of partnership with States, local community organizations, and others to strengthen and expand participation in SFSP. We continue to pursue those efforts energetically.

At the same time, we recognize that the program does not reach all those who could benefit when school is out. Earlier this year, Congress provided \$85 million to demonstrate improved approaches to summer feeding for low-income children, and to assess their impact on food insecurity among children. USDA is using this resource to create the Summer Food for Children demonstrations, which will explore and test a number of alternatives to the existing program over the next several summers.

Strengthened SFSP Demonstrations will test changes to the existing structure and delivery mechanism of SFSP to determine if they lead to increased participation.

- Two initial demonstrations – a project in Arkansas that provides incentives to extend the duration of SFSP operations, and a project in Mississippi that enhances the program with funding for enrichment activities, began in Summer 2010.
- Two additional demonstrations, testing meal delivery in rural areas, and “backpack” food packages for consumption over weekends, will begin in Summer 2011.

We are also exploring *Household-Based Alternative Demonstrations* which will provide summer food benefits using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and WIC electronic benefit transfer (EBT) technology as the delivery mechanism, to give low-income families with children more resources to use at food stores during the summer.

- Small-scale “proof-of-concept” demonstrations of EBT-based approaches will begin Summer 2011.
- Expanded operations of successful first-year models, including additional test sites and variation in operational parameters such as the value of benefits provided, will begin Summer 2012.
- We will also examine the feasibility and potential benefits of using cards similar to store “gift cards” to provide more purchasing power to these families, to determine if a proof-of-concept demonstration of that approach would be worthwhile.

States apply competitively to operate the demonstrations, and describe in their application how they propose to implement them. USDA is soliciting applications from States to operate demonstrations. Projects that succeed operationally in the first summer will continue for two additional years (three years total). Applications are due to FNS on October 29, 2010, so that

awards can be made in time for selected States to prepare to implement the projects in the summer of 2011.

The law requires a rigorous evaluation of the impacts of the demonstrations, to provide Congress and the Administration with clear, sound and timely findings to make decisions about potential legislative changes. (To ensure the strongest possible evaluation, USDA expects that families in the selected demonstration sites will be randomly assigned to receive the new household benefit.)

We plan to collect information on the household food security status of participating children, as well as on their food choices and other simple measures of nutritional status, and compare these with children who are not selected to participate. We will seek to assess the impact of the SFSP enhancements on the number of children served and the number of providers who operated the program, along with some limited information on food security and food choices.

In addition to these impact questions, we intend to document the process of, and challenges in, implementing each of the demonstrated approaches. This will be used to improve the demonstrations as they proceed, and make the experience of these demonstrations available to support and improve further implementation if the results lead to policy changes that expand one or more of the demonstrated approaches.

USDA plans to award a contract for an independent evaluation of the demonstrations in Fall 2010.

In the near-term, the Summer Food for Children demonstrations will provide thousands of low-income children in the demonstration communities with enhanced SFSP services, or with substantial new household food benefits during the summer. In all, we anticipate as many as 25 different pilot sites for household-based projects, along with the four (possibly Statewide) demonstrations testing enhancements to traditional SFSP programs, serving as many as 75,000 to 100,000 children over the course of the project.

In the longer term, the project will provide critical knowledge about the impact of a cutting-edge nutrition intervention on achieving real improvement in food security among our children during the summer months. The evaluation of these projects is intended to provide policymakers with clear, rigorous and timely findings to make decisions about potential changes to Federal summer feeding programs in future legislative cycles.