



Serving Communities:  
**Healthy Meals  
for Children**

The critical role of park  
and recreation agencies  
in addressing child hunger.



National Recreation  
and Park Association



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The National Recreation and Park Association thanks the Walmart Foundation for recognizing and supporting the critical role of park and recreation agencies in ensuring children have access to healthy meals during out-of-school times.

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# Introduction

## National need for feeding programs

A parent's well-meaning admonition to "finish your dinner because children are starving in China," is quaint on two counts: eating your own food, of course, will do nothing to satisfy anyone else's hunger and it is no longer seen as only China where food insecurity cries for action. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2010, 49 million people in the United States lived in households where members were uncertain of having or being able to acquire enough food to live a healthy life. Of those, 16.2 million were children.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to imagine that the richest country in the world has such a large number of residents — adults and children — who do not know where their next meal will come from. Such food insecurity often is the first step toward hunger and anyone who is undernourished or who must regularly eat poorly may suffer physically or emotionally. With about one in six U.S. residents experiencing food insecurity, the entire fabric of our society is challenged. Those 49 million people are unable or unmotivated to be engaged in productive activities to improve communities because hungry people or people simply worried about adequate food intake often are exhausted from dissipating energy required simply to hold on.<sup>2</sup> Children especially are at risk. Research is clear that children in food-insecure households are more likely to develop health problems than children in similar households that do not struggle to purchase adequate nourishing food.<sup>3</sup>

## The role of parks and recreation in feeding programs

Given that food insecurity affects one in six Americans, you might expect that the country would turn exclusively to big federal programs or large foundations for solutions. While there is plenty of room for big national funders, the real work of solving food insecurity is likely to be most successful in the hands of local organizations that know the needs of their own communities. Parks and recreation programs are well suited to lead the way to improve access to healthy food, especially for those most vulnerable, children and youth. Park and recreation departments are experts at running summer and after-school programs where participating children receive meals and snacks that may be the only nutritious foods they eat outside of school. When children are served healthy meals, park and recreation departments are helping not only address the immediate need of hunger, but are also engaging these children in their other educational and enrichment activities.

## Federally-sponsored feeding programs

There are a number of basic practices that organizations must provide to establish and operate a federally sponsored feeding program. The two such programs most often utilized by park and recreation agencies are the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Each of these programs is administered by USDA Food and Nutrition Services and provides federal funds to

schools, local governments and other feeding program sponsors to serve meals and snacks to children age 18 and under. The USDA provides reimbursement for food costs to programs providing meals to low-income children, based on the location of the feeding site or individual participant qualification.

Feeding program sponsors can receive funding for meals and/or snacks, depending on whether participating in CACFP or SFSP. More information about the requirements of federally sponsored feeding programs is available at the USDA Food and Nutrition Services website ([www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov)).

This toolkit is a reference guide for park and recreation agencies providing or planning to provide feeding programs to children and youth. The creation of the toolkit was funded by the Walmart Foundation and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). It is a practical guide detailing promising practices in the provision of feeding programs for youth. Using this toolkit will help park and recreation agencies increase their understanding of child and youth feeding programs, identify successful practices and activities, and build the capacity to conduct or improve their own feeding programs.

**Figure 1: Typical Meal Components Required for USDA Reimbursement**

A lunch or supper must include:	A breakfast must include:	A snack must include at least two of the following:
1 serving of milk	1 serving of milk	1 serving of milk
2 servings of fruits and/or vegetables	1 serving of fruit or vegetables	1 serving of fruits and/or vegetables
1 serving of grains	1 serving of whole grains	1 serving of grains
1 serving of meat or meat alternative		1 serving of protein

# Toolkit Background

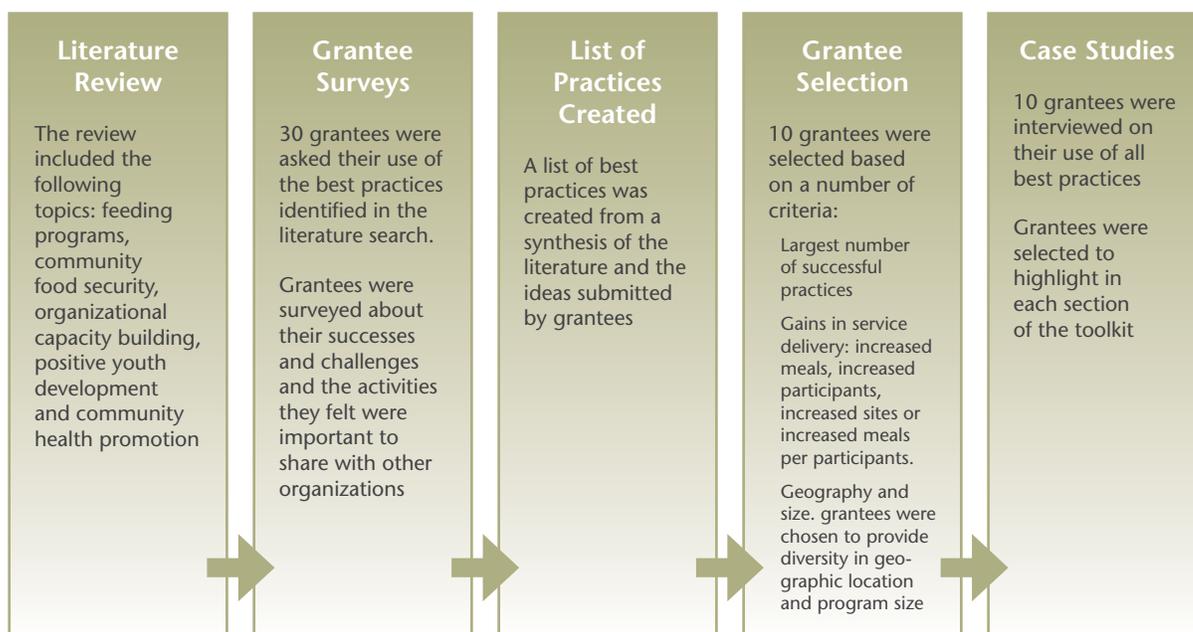
The park and recreation agencies highlighted in this publication participated in the NRPA Serving Communities — Healthy Meals for Children Initiative. This program, funded by the Walmart Foundation, aimed at decreasing child hunger and poor nutrition through parks and recreation out-of-school time programs. The goal of the grant was to increase the number of nutritious meals served to children by 2.5 million over a two-year period. Thirty park and recreation agencies received funding to build capacity to provide these additional meals.

The information in this toolkit was developed through a multi-step process including literature reviews, grantee surveys and case-study interviews (Figure 2).

The 10 park and recreation organizations highlighted in this toolkit include:

- Bakersfield, CA
- Brownsville-Haywood County, TN
- Columbus, OH
- Greenville, SC
- Kansas City, MO
- New Bedford, MA
- Philadelphia, PA
- St. Petersburg, FL
- Washington, DC
- West Bend, WI

Figure 2: NRPA Toolkit Methodology



# Promising Practices in Park and Recreation Feeding Programs

Although all feeding programs have a unique set of participants, partners, and program constraints, a number of practices appear to be promising. Each of these practices is covered

in more detail in this toolkit. Case studies highlighting implementation of these practices are included.

Figure 3: Promising Practices



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## Practice #1: Partnerships for Success

# Everybody needs somebody

### Benefits of partnerships

Partners for A Hunger-Free Oregon, an anti-hunger advocacy organization in Oregon, has found that one of the most important elements of a successful feeding program is supportive partnerships.

*“Community isolation can be a serious challenge. It means you’re doing everything on your own, hidden from those who might be able and willing to support you in a variety of ways. This limits your ability to build capacity, and ultimately makes you less sustainable. Take time to engage others in your mission. You will strengthen your program in the long run.”<sup>4</sup>*

Research has shown that isolated community-based organizations, especially those that rely on volunteers, are more likely to struggle and fail than those involved in supportive networks.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, dynamic partnerships can dramatically increase the effectiveness and sustainability of your feeding program. Partnerships allow organizations to learn from each others’ experiences with the effect of increasing program efficiency and ultimately improving the breadth and quality of services to children and families. By collaborating with other agencies, even those that may seem entirely unrelated to your mission, you can garner a broader range of resources. There may be opportunities to share sites for meetings or service provision, fundraising databases or networks of volunteers. Where services are redundant or similar, resources to run one service can be diverted to intensify or broaden others. Consolidated communication may be possible to reach

broader audiences through joint newsletters or press releases. Success rates in funding proposals could increase with the weight of a proposal from a cooperative compared to a single agency. Fundraising events are likely to be more successful when your organization partners with others, like the Chamber of Commerce, schools, faith-based organizations, or other nonprofits. And unlike a single organization, a team of organizations is more likely to influence community policy and direction.<sup>6</sup> As will be seen below, case-study NRPA grantees benefitted in nearly all of these ways from partnerships.

### Key strategies to create successful partnerships

Engaging in meaningful partnerships takes motivation and a plan, and not all partnerships and collaborations are successful. Research has found that successful partnerships have certain practices in common. Consider how you can implement some of these strategies, or add to the ones you are already using, as you strengthen your network of partner organizations:

- Identify service needs and organizational gaps that could be filled by partners
- Strategically identify partnerships that will be most beneficial to your program
- Create a partnership plan that describes the purposes and activities that will link the partners over the coming 12 to 24 months
- Partner with diverse types of organizations, both for-profit businesses and nonprofits, private and public

- Provide meaningful roles and engaging activities for partners
- Work with partners to leverage community resources in order to achieve goals
- Communicate regularly with partners — sharing information on each others' activities, successes, and challenges, as well as community needs and resources
- Co-sponsor activities with partners
- Participate in grant writing and fundraising activities together
- Periodically publish evaluation findings in communications aimed at a wide variety of stakeholders, including partners
- Create community events with partners, not only to familiarize the public with each program but also to show the links among program partners

Your creativity in finding strong, and even uncommon, partners that are outside of the sector in which you operate can be an enormous asset for feeding programs. An unlikely nonprofit partner may hold the solution to a problem you have faced for a long time. Partners from the private sector may be especially powerful allies, not simply because they can tap into an entirely new arena of clients and supporters, but once you have a partner from the private sector, you may feel some healthy pressure to link your work to quantitative measures of success (a more common approach in the private sector than typically is used in the public sector). Private sector partners also may have easier access to communication professionals or media outlets. The more people are familiar with and support your mission, the more sustainable your program will be. You cannot succeed doing everything on your own, hidden from the good will of potential partners. And don't stop until you have at least three partners.<sup>7</sup>

## PARTNERSHIPS AMONG NRPA GRANTEES

NRPA contracted with National Research Center, Inc. to conduct an evaluation of 30 NRPA-funded feeding programs participating in the Serving Communities — Healthy Meals for Children Initiative. The study found that 97% had partnerships with one or more organizations. Types of partnering organizations included businesses, community-based organizations, farmers, food banks, schools, federal, state, and local government, and others. The grantees had partnerships with a median of 14 organizations, most frequently community-based organizations (77% had this type of partnership), local government (67%), and businesses (63%). Grantees had the greatest number of partnerships with community-based organizations (a median of 5) and schools (a median of 4).

	Busi- nesses	CBOs	Farmers	Food Banks	Schools	Fed Gov't	State Gov't	Local Gov't	Other	Overall
Percent with Partnership	63%	77%	27%	57%	60%	33%	53%	67%	17%	97%
Partnerships	2	5	1	1	4	1	1	2	6	14



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Building Successful Partnerships

Mark McCain, Director of the Washington, D.C. Parks and Recreation's Office of Food and Nutrition Services, believes strongly in partnerships:

*"Partnership, partnership, partnership. Whatever it is that you are trying to get done, there is somebody out there who will do it and they will do it for you for free!"*

All 10 of the case-study grantees had numerous partners and used them to strengthen their programs in a variety of ways, including:

- Increasing access to specialized services
- Enriching program content
- Expanding services and filling gaps
- Leveraging resources and expanding service coverage
- Sharing information
- Increasing public outreach and visibility

### Increasing access to specialized services

This was one of the most common benefits of partnerships among the 10 grantees. Through community partnerships, feeding programs had access to such diverse services as: chef-prepared meals, on-site oral health screenings and education, program evaluation, and on-site fresh produce vendors.

Through partnerships, two grantees were able to provide chef-prepared meals as part of additional enrichment programs. The program coordinator of the City of Greenville Parks and Recreation's feeding program developed a partnership with Project Host, a Greenville nonprofit organization that addresses poverty and hunger in the community. Project Host's culinary school provides chef training to the unemployed and underemployed. The chefs-in-training prepared hot, "scratch-made" dinners every weekday for children in the Parks and

Recreation after-school program as well as at other after-school sites, at no cost to the programs. The City of New Bedford Parks, Recreation and Beaches summer food service program organized Healthy Meal Nights for families at schools during the school year. Chefs from local restaurants, Kids First (a statewide nonprofit that promotes healthy eating and physical activity for children and families), and the vocational-technical high school taught families how to cook healthy, low-cost meals while preparing a dinner that families ate together. Families were sent home with recipes and food shopping lists.

Several grantees provided oral health services through partnerships. The New Bedford program partnered with the City Health Department to bring dental hygienists to summer sites to provide oral hygiene education. Similarly, the West Bend Parks and Recreation Department partnered with the Wisconsin Dental Association to offer oral health education at summer camp programs. The Brownsville-Haywood County Parks and Recreation Department arranged for dentists and dental hygienists to provide free dental check-ups and fluoride treatments to children in summer programs (both Parks and Recreation and others) and arranged transportation to bring them to the check-up location.

The Washington, D.C. Parks and Recreation summer feeding program partnered with D.C. Hunger Solutions, a local anti-hunger advocacy and education organization that provides the program with an annual evaluation, including the evaluation materials, implementation, and data analysis.

The City of Bakersfield Recreation and Parks Department incorporated the school district's farmer's market into the recreation center's summer lunch program. The school district's food services department has a local produce vendor set up a stall occasionally at the larger public schools. Last summer, the school district arranged for the vendor to come to the city recreation center for a day. It was open to

the children in the summer day camp and the general public. Everyone visiting the stall received two dollars (\$2) to spend on fresh fruits and vegetables. This event was also an opportunity to increase public outreach about the summer lunch program. Linda McVicker, coordinator of the Recreation and Parks Department feeding program, believes that the produce stall helped to generate interest from the surrounding community in the lunch program and other recreation center activities.

Using partnerships to enrich program content was a common strategy among the 10 grantees.

- The West Bend program used state SNAP (formerly the Food Stamps program) nutrition educators to teach the children about healthy foods as well as 4H volunteers for seed-planting activities.
- The St. Petersburg Parks and Recreation summer and after-school feeding program distributed a cook book of healthy, low-cost recipes that was produced by dieticians at the local children's hospital. Hospital staff also provided nutrition education classes targeted at middle-school children who attended summer programs at recreation center sites.
- At the Brownsville-Haywood County summer program, staff from the University of Tennessee Extension and a children's hospital in Memphis provided Zumba



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lessons along with other fitness activities and nutrition education.

- Personal trainers from a local health club provided fitness classes at New Bedford's larger summer feeding sites.
- The Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department's food pack program offered summer cooking classes at several sites that were provided by the University of Missouri-Kansas City Extension. The food used in the classes was donated by the local food bank. In addition, the Lincoln University Extension will be starting a community garden with the children at one of the recreation centers.
- A partnership with the University of the District of Columbia enabled the Washington, D.C. program to provide nutrition and wellness information at summer feeding sites.
- The University of California Extension provided the Bakersfield program with healthy cooking recipe books and training on produce gardening and nutrition.
- Through LiveWell Greenville, a nonprofit collaboration that develops policies and initiatives to support healthy lifestyles, the Greenville program received training materials produced by the CATCH program (Coordinated Approach To Child Health), a nationwide, evidence-based, school health program that promotes physical activity, healthy food choices, and prevention of tobacco use in children. In addition, the City of Greenville Youth Commission acquired bikes and helmets to be given to every child in the feeding program. The city's Recycling Manager visited a feeding site to educate the children on composting and helped them build their own bins for composting different products.

Developing partnerships within the same agency can also be a useful strategy to enhance program content, as demonstrated by the Bakersfield feeding program. The Recreation and Parks Department offers a free, year-round healthy eating class for children aged 5 to 17



that participants in the after-school program or summer camp can attend at the recreation center. The instructor, who received training and materials from the University of California Extension, teaches the children how to cook nutritious foods and how to make healthy food choices. She has partnered with another free, year-round children's class at the recreation center on Chinese culture and language, inviting the instructor of that class to teach the children Chinese cooking about once a month. The Healthy Eating class also joined forces with the recreation center's community garden program, so that children who work in the garden learn how to grow fresh produce and how to prepare it. The children have the opportunity to work in the garden, learn about healthy foods and how to cook what they are growing, and eat healthy lunches and snacks provided by the feeding program.

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### Expanding services and filling gaps

Providing food for their children during out-of-school times can be challenging for low-income families. NRPA grantees have used partnerships to help provide children with backpacks filled with nutritious food during weekends and school holidays.

The Kansas City feeding program provides weekend food packs to children 48 weeks of the year through its NRPA grant and food from the local food bank. A local grocery store has donated food when the food bank closes for periods of time. A senior volunteer group, Seniors on the Move, located at one of the community centers, and other community volunteer groups have provided help in packing and distributing the food packs.

The Brownsville-Haywood County program partners with the school district and a local church in separate projects to provide children with weekend food packs.

In Bakersfield, the school district provides the food for the summer lunch program, but because the district’s summer school program does not operate on Fridays, the recreation center’s day campers had to bring their own lunch that day. To fill this gap, the feeding program partnered with a local nonprofit organization, Flood Bakersfield Ministries, which offers free breakfasts and lunches on Fridays and

is located next door to the recreation center. Last summer, both the campers and members of the general public who came to the recreation center for the summer lunch program received free meals every Friday.

When its NRPA grant came to an end, the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department was able to continue the after-school feeding program through a partnership with Children’s Hunger Alliance, a statewide anti-hunger organization that works with schools and community agencies to provide food for children. The after-school program currently provides children with a hot dinner at 13 recreation center sites.

### Leveraging resources and expanding service coverage

Partnerships have been a key strategy in stretching budgets and feeding more children. Several programs have received help from youth employment programs or vocational-technical work-study programs that assign youth workers to parks and recreation sites (New Bedford, Greenville, Washington, D.C.). Youth aged 18 or younger in employment programs or vocational-technical schools are also eligible to be fed at those sites, in addition to helping with food distribution, clean-up, and children’s activities.

The City of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation summer feeding program has developed partnerships with other city departments to provide, for example, trash pick-up at neighborhood feeding sites.

A number of parks and recreation departments (Washington, D.C., New Bedford, Columbus, Brownsville-Haywood County) sponsor feeding programs at other community-based organizations, such as faith-based organizations, YMCAs, boys and girls clubs, public libraries, and others, providing food, food-service training, and oversight at those organizations’ summer camps and after-school programs. Those relationships greatly extend the reach of parks and recreation feeding programs.

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## Sharing information

Partnerships can expand a program's information base about needs and resources. Nancy Cates, Director of the Brownsville-Haywood County Parks and Recreation Department, and staff of the local nonprofits whose feeding programs the department sponsors regularly share information about activities and programs that they can incorporate into their respective children's programs.

The Philadelphia Parks and Recreation summer feeding program interacts with such organizations as the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger and the Philadelphia Archdiocese food assistance program to exchange information about community needs and resources.

Staff at the food services department of West Bend's local school district shared their knowledge and experience with the parks and recreation department in organizing and operating a children's feeding program. In addition, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction provided vital support in helping the program navigate USDA's application forms, dietary guidelines, site and other requirements, and reimbursement procedures.

## Increasing public outreach and visibility

The Bakersfield program's partnership with Flood Bakersfield Ministries for Friday lunches provided the added benefit that the two organizations distributed each other's flyers about upcoming events and activities, expanding each agency's public outreach.

Other programs have partnered with the local health department or school district to disseminate information about the feeding program (New Bedford, Washington, D.C., Kansas City). In Washington, D.C., the Office of the State Superintendent of Education has been instrumental in publicizing the Parks and Recreation feeding program to community organizations that would like to feed the children attending their programs.

In West Bend, the local food bank publicly endorsed the parks and recreation feeding program and provided support for the program with the local political leadership, enhancing the program's visibility in the community and acceptance by elected officials.

## Practice #2: Harnessing the Power of Volunteers

# Ask and you shall receive

## Benefits of volunteers

Volunteers are the beating heart of many feeding programs. By contributing their time, energy, and talents, volunteers pump the life blood of feeding organizations. Residents who donate their time serve in many roles, generally falling into four categories: direct service, administrative support, fundraising, and leadership. Within these categories, they may serve as teachers, tutors, counselors, mentors, companions, and coaches. They organize events, participate in fundraisers, provide clerical support, develop new resources, provide logistical support, develop programs, assist with promotional events, and provide leadership and guidance.<sup>8</sup>

There are a number of ways in which volunteers can benefit feeding programs as well as other community-based children's programs:<sup>9</sup>

- Increase the quality of services and provide access to a wider range of specialized skills
- Create community ownership and generate public support for the program by sharing their positive experiences with others in their community
- Expand the program's overall network, increasing its capacity in terms of skills, donors, partnerships, and alliances
- Help lower the ratio of adults to participants
- Help the program provide more personalized attention to the children it serves
- Provide positive role models for children at a time when many need it most

## Key strategies to maximize the benefits of volunteers

Maximizing the benefits of volunteers takes commitment, planning, time, and organization. Each organization should spend time considering whether and why they want to work with volunteers and develop a philosophy for the overall engagement of volunteers. Volunteers should never be considered "free help" but rather as extensions of paid staff engaged in the fulfillment of the organization's mission.<sup>10</sup>

As Partners for A Hunger-Free Oregon points out,

*"Volunteers want to help but they require direction, support, training, communication, and most importantly, a volunteer management plan... Having systems in place for guidance and direction will make the process easier on you and them. A poorly managed volunteer experience can be frustrating to the volunteer and can do real damage to your program's effectiveness and reputation."<sup>11</sup>*

Organizations that are most successful at harnessing volunteer resources typically:<sup>12</sup>

- Conduct a periodic organizational assessment to determine whether and in what ways volunteers should be used and the organizational capacity for effective use of volunteers (e.g., financial and staff resources required in recruiting, training, managing, and assessing volunteers)
- Develop plans around the appropriate skills, expertise, uses and roles of volunteers

- Identify effective recruiting strategies to attract capable people
- Have policies and procedures for volunteers, including risk management procedures, rules and regulations, and expected time commitment
- Screen and interview applicants for volunteer positions
- Place volunteers where they will be most effective in terms of the organization's needs and the volunteer's skills and available time
- Orient and train volunteers, not only on specific tasks, but on the organization's mission, vision and goals
- Provide meaningful volunteer jobs and roles in the organization
- Have a designated manager to supervise volunteers
- Empower volunteers by encouraging them to take initiative and ask questions
- Periodically assess volunteer performance
- Periodically assess staff support for volunteers
- Track volunteer hours
- Assess the impact of volunteers on organizational outcomes and objectives
- Regularly show appreciation and recognition of volunteers

Although there are no guarantees that all volunteers will be beneficial for an organization, these best practices should increase the likelihood of success. Particularly important are initial and periodic assessments of whether and how volunteers should be used. Your feeding program may need to develop its capacity to effectively use this resource.

### NRPA GRANTEES' USE OF VOLUNTEERS

The NRC evaluation of NRPA's grantee feeding programs found that 20 of the 30 programs used volunteers, which ranged from as few as 2 to over 900 to support their feeding programs. Among the grantees that used volunteers, the median number of volunteers was 10.

Percent using volunteers	67%
Median # volunteers (among grantees using volunteers)	10

Source: NRPA Serving Communities – Healthy Meals for Children Initiative Evaluation. Summer 2011 Results.



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Harnessing the Power of Volunteers

Volunteers provided our case-study grantees with a range of valuable services in the areas of:

- Providing specialized services and enriching program content
- Hosting neighborhood feeding sites
- Assisting recreation center staff at meal and snack times

### Providing specialized services and enriching program content

Many NRPA grantees have been able to incorporate new components into their programs by making use of volunteers with specific types of expertise (Brownsville-Haywood County, Greenville, New Bedford, Kansas City, West Bend):

- Dentists and dental hygienists for oral screenings, fluoride treatments and oral hygiene education

- Chefs to prepare family dinners and give out recipes and shopping lists for healthy cooking on a budget
- Cooking teachers to demonstrate how to make healthy meals
- 4H youth to teach children how to plant seeds and grow their own food

### Hosting neighborhood feeding sites

Two programs rely on neighborhood volunteers to host feeding sites. The Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department summer feeding program operates “playstreets” — small, residential streets not close to city recreation centers that are blocked off to traffic during weekdays. The program delivers food to the site, and a designated, trained block resident provides feeding coordination and supervision. The Brownsville-Haywood County summer feeding program offers “shade tree lunches”, in

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which lunches are served in the yards of private homes, apartment complexes, and public housing projects, and at summer programs run by nonprofit organizations. Neighborhood residents and organizations apply to host and supervise the meals.

### Assisting recreation center staff at meal and snack times

Serving meals to children requires many hands to set up, count the number of children and meals, get the children to the table, serve the food, supervise while they are eating, and clean up. Weekend food packs need to be stuffed, counted, distributed and recorded. Volunteers can really make the difference with those activities. Many recreation centers have volunteer groups that meet on site and are

available to help out with activities and events. Often, those groups are age-specific; youth leadership councils and senior groups are common examples. Faith-based groups, senior volunteer organizations, corporate volunteer programs, fraternities and sororities, scout troops, 4H clubs, community service groups and AmeriCorps may also be good sources of volunteers. In addition, work-study programs at local colleges and vocational-technical schools and local youth employment programs can be asked to assign teens and young adults to help out at recreation centers, where needed, at no cost to the recreation center. Feeding programs in Greenville, New Bedford, West Bend, Kansas City, Columbus, St. Petersburg and Washington, D.C. all used one or more of these resources to help at meal times or with weekend food packs.

## Practice #3: Using Outreach to Increase Awareness of Your Program

# Shine the light

### Benefits of public outreach

An organization can have a vital mission, strong leadership and sufficient resources, but unless it is known in the community, its impact will be limited. Outreach is an essential element for strengthening and extending the work of community-based organizations. It can take many forms, including marketing and public relations; community education and advocacy; collaborations, alliances, and partnerships; networking and more.

Outreach is a mechanism for building a base of support. Increased networking and greater outreach mean access to more people. The more people who know about the organization and its work, the more opportunity there is to attract people to the organization as volunteers, clients, or supporters. Outreach and networking activities can have multiple purposes. A children's science museum, for example, may participate in a community festival not only to promote its educational programs to the public, but also to introduce the museum to new sources of potential partners, donors or volunteers. Without effective outreach efforts, organizations may limit their access to resources and fail to establish a positive image or reputation within the community.<sup>13</sup>

Public outreach should target diverse audiences:

- Schools, faith communities, and community associations near your feeding sites to help get the word out to families with children and also as potential sources of partnerships and volunteers
- Community-based organizations that might want you to sponsor their feeding program or ask you to assist them in developing their own
- Anti-hunger groups for sharing information about needs, resources, and best practices
- Business associations for possible partnerships, volunteers, donations, and media access
- Volunteer groups
- Local media

Public outreach can be more than getting the word out about your program. It can educate your audiences about broader issues like the prevalence of hunger or child obesity in your community. Public outreach can also be about advocacy — working with other community organizations on coordinated responses to hunger or promoting the availability of healthy foods.

### Key strategies to increase public outreach

Key strategies in effective public outreach have been found to:<sup>14</sup>

- Have a strategic communication plan in place
- Develop one or more core messages
- Identify appropriate audiences
- Identify and train one or more staff members to talk with media and the general public

## PUBLIC OUTREACH AMONG NRPA GRANTEES

NRPA grantees used multiple activities to get the word out about their programs. As part of the evaluation, the 30 grantees were asked about the types of outreach activities they used. All but four programs (87%) used at least one of eight different activities, and on average, programs used five activities (Table 3). Most common were flyers, used by 87% of the grantees, and press releases, by 80%.

	Percent using
Media events	47%
Press releases	80%
Press conferences	30%
Interviews	53%
Letters to editor	10%
Newspaper articles	50%
Ads/ sponsorships	40%
Flyers	87%
Median # of activities	5

Source: NRPA Serving Communities – Healthy Meals for Children Initiative Evaluation. Summer 2011 Results.

- Target key media for regular outreach
- Have some combination of web, printed, and video materials to inform the media and the public about the program
- Develop events that showcase the program and its goals to the media and the public
- Work with stakeholders and partners on joint marketing and outreach efforts



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Using Outreach to Increase the Awareness of their Programs

Feeding programs often go to great lengths for public outreach, and all case-study grantees used a number of activities to publicize their programs. The most frequently used outreach activities among the 10 programs were:

- Putting out press releases
- Advertising on radio and local cable TV and in city and community newspapers
- Partnering with schools to send brochures home with children
- Hanging posters in recreation centers, grocery stores, and other public places
- Going door to door with brochures and door-hangers
- Leaving brochures in public housing community rooms
- Posting information on parks and recreation department web sites
- Putting information on Facebook

- Setting up information booths at events held at recreation centers and other community venues
- Passing out brochures at school open houses, parent-teacher nights, and other school events
- Attending Neighborhood Watch and other neighborhood meetings

In addition, Washington, D.C. ran a Public Service Advertisement (PSA) for its feeding program on all local cable and dish TV channels. The PSA featured one of the Washington Redskins' star players speaking on behalf of the program.

Several programs have relied on partnerships with other community organizations to help get the word out.

- The Washington, D.C. Health Department distributes information about the feeding program through its neighborhood-

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based health programs. The Office of the D.C. State Superintendent of Education publicizes the feeding program to community organizations, some of which end up partnering with the parks and recreation program to become sponsored feeding sites or even become their own feeding sites.

- In the case of Bakersfield, a partnership with another community organization to fill a gap in meal service resulted in the two organizations distributing each other's flyers about upcoming events and activities.
- In Columbus, the Children's Hunger Alliance places an insert about the summer feeding program into Medicaid mailings to recipients, puts placards about the program inside public buses, and ran a PSA on a local radio station. Through another partnership, the feeding program has a call-in night aired on the local affiliate of one of the national TV networks, in which people can call to find out the location of the closest feeding site and other information.
- Other programs organized day-long events for children. These events involved multiple partnerships, advertising prior to the event, and media presence during the event. All of these activities helped to publicize the event to the target population and also to increase broad community awareness of the feeding programs.
- St. Petersburg Parks and Recreation put on a day-long health/wellness youth conference for elementary and middle school children who participated in the summer feeding program. Throughout the day, about 1,800 children attended a variety of sessions at different venues in the downtown area, featuring members of a local professional soccer team teaching warm-up skills, trainers talking about how to eat right to play sports, exhibits on healthy eating, sessions modeled after "Eat This Not That," and similar activities.
- Last summer, West Bend Parks and Recreation organized a Dairy Carnival. With the help of the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board and the local dairy association marketing group, there was an artificial cow for "milking", cheese tasting, milk mustache "photo ops," and more. They plan to do another Dairy Carnival this summer.
- The Brownsville-Haywood County program organizes an annual summer Kids Day for children and families throughout the county. With funding from local businesses and the help of about 75 volunteers, at least 800 children come to have their faces painted, ride down water slides, play games and, of course, eat.

## Practice #4: Making the Health and Wellness Connection

# Food to fit

## Obesity among the Nation's children

The epidemic in child obesity has been well-publicized. In 2009-10, nearly 17% of children aged 2 to 19 were obese, as defined by Body Mass Index (BMI) at or above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile, nearly triple the rate in 1980.<sup>15</sup> Worse, nearly 36% of adults aged 20 and over were obese in 2009-10.<sup>16</sup> These numbers are particularly disturbing because obesity is associated with multiple serious and chronic health outcomes such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. Until recently, such illnesses were seen primarily in adults. Due to the rise in child obesity, a growing number of young people are showing signs of these conditions, as well as bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, and social and psychological problems.<sup>17</sup>

The effects of a child being overweight are potentially life long: overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of being overweight adults. And, an estimated \$254 billion is spent annually on direct medical costs and from lost productivity due to premature illness and death, based on the current rate of adolescent overweight and obesity.<sup>18</sup>

The increase in overweight and obesity among the nation's children has been attributed to such factors as a more sedentary lifestyle due to the vast array of electronic "toys" available to them and parents' fear of potential danger in allowing them to play outside or walk to the nearest recreation center, as well as greater reliance on fast food among busy families. In addition, many low-income families must travel long distances to buy fresh food due to the

absence of supermarkets in their neighborhoods, areas that have become known as food deserts. As a result, families have no choice but to rely on close-by convenience stores that typically stock inexpensive junk food — primarily carbohydrates that are high in calories but have little, if any, nutritional value. Historically, overweight and obesity were associated with affluence and were rarely found among the poor. Because of rapid changes in the types of foods that are mass produced and their availability and low cost per calorie, overweight and obesity have become associated with poverty and food insecurity in households and communities.<sup>19</sup>

## The HEAL movement

In response to trends in overweight and obesity, efforts to change the behavior of individuals, families, and communities and the environments in which people spend their time have developed around the country. Lifestyle factors that are known to contribute to overweight and obesity, in particular lack of physical activity and poor eating habits, are being addressed by a wide range of efforts from federal, state and local health agencies, health advocacy organizations, cities and counties, health professionals, employers, school districts, and others — including park and recreation agencies. Collectively, these efforts have become known as HEAL — Healthy Eating and Active Lifestyles.

Park and recreation department feeding programs and health/wellness programs are a great pairing. The universal mission of parks and recreation departments is to enhance the quality of life and wellness of the community.

Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight through good nutrition and physical activity is a natural fit. Parks and recreation centers are often staffed with exercise and fitness professionals. Even if they are not directly involved with the feeding program, they may be available to lead the children in daily fitness activities. In addition, parks and recreation centers usually have both indoor and outdoor athletic facilities — gyms, sports fields, playgrounds, community gardens, hiking trails and bike paths.

### Key strategies in providing health and wellness activities for children and youth

Organizations that engage in the following practices often have successful health and wellness programs:

- Offer activities that encourage goal setting and attainment
- Offer activities that encourage measurement and tracking to show progress made toward goals
- Offer activities that encourage team work and collaboration
- Let youth choose and plan activities, selecting from a list of possible activities
- Provide opportunities for youth of all levels of fitness
- Offer a variety of physical activities, choosing those that allow youth of all fitness levels to feel successful or gain a sense of skill mastery
- Provide opportunities for hands-on activities, for example, cooking, gardening, and composting
- Offer activities that also can be done at home

#### NRPA GRANTEES' USE OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS ACTIVITIES

Health and wellness activities were almost universal among the 30 grantee feeding programs. All but one (97%) had physical activities, and all but four taught nutrition (87%). Half had community gardens.

Physical activities	Nutritional programs	Community gardens
97%	87%	50%

Source: NRPA Serving Communities – Healthy Meals for Children Initiative Evaluation. Summer 2011 Results.



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Making the Health and Wellness Connection

NRPA grantees are increasingly adding value to their feeding programs with health and wellness components. As Renee Dufour, New Bedford Parks and Recreation Director, stated,

*"...the focus for many, many years was just provide them with a meal. So come into the park, get your meal, eat, and [leave]. ... The focus now is really on keeping the children in the park. Playing games. Being active with them and educating them on making healthy decisions — being a mentor for that four-hour period that we definitely have them."*

To date, all 10 of the case-study grantees have incorporated one or more health and wellness activities into their programs. Most common are nutrition education, healthy cooking classes for children and families, and physical fitness, and several programs have also offered oral health activities.

New Bedford contracted with a local health club to provide fitness instructors who taught the children Zumba and other exercises at the larger summer feeding sites. Through a partnership with the local health department, dental hygienists went to city parks to provide oral hygiene education using arts and crafts and puppets. During the school year, the program, with the help of its NRPA grant, has been organizing Healthy Meal Nights at local schools. Professional chefs prepare nutritious, sit-down dinners that families eat together, demonstrate how to cook healthy foods on a budget, and hand out recipes and food shopping lists. The children are engaged in fitness activities and are given coloring books with a fitness theme. Each dinner has a different health/wellness theme — Dancing Out Diabetes for example.

The St. Petersburg program, using its NRPA funding, had a parks and recreation staff person travel among recreation center sites last summer to provide education on healthy living. The

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program also organized a day-long health/wellness youth exposition for elementary and middle school children who participated in the summer feeding program. A weekly newsletter is sent home with the children in the summer program that includes a column on wellness and healthy recipes, and a monthly e-newsletter is sent out during the school year with the same kind of information. In addition, dieticians from the local children's hospital provide nutrition and healthy cooking classes at five feeding sites. The parks and recreation department recently developed a staff position to coordinate its community wellness activities. This summer, she is planning another health/wellness youth education program and also has plans to bring mobile produce vendors into recreation centers so that when parents pick up their children, they can buy fresh produce at the same time.

The Greenville feeding program partners with LiveWell Greenville, a nonprofit collaboration that develops policies and initiatives to support healthy lifestyles. LiveWell has provided the program with technical assistance to set health/wellness goals at each site. Through LiveWell, the program became part of CATCH (Coordinated Approach To Child Health), a nationwide, evidence-based, school health program that promotes physical activity, healthy food choices, and prevention of tobacco use in children. CATCH provided "train the trainer" and other tools for parks and recreation center staff to support healthy lifestyles activities at feeding sites. In addition, the City of Greenville Youth Commission has a program on bike safety and has acquired bikes and helmets to be given to every child in the feeding program. One park and recreation site has a bike share program so that the children can check out bikes to ride on park bike paths. The bike check-out is right next to a community garden. At that garden and another located at a different site, the children plant and harvest vegetables all summer.

West Bend has nutrition educators from the state SNAP program come to the summer program to teach the children nutrition using games.

The Philadelphia Summer Food Service Program provides their playstreets with recreational equipment in addition to food.

The Brownsville-Haywood County program brings in staff from the University of Tennessee Extension and a children's hospital in Memphis to teach nutrition and do fitness activities at the park and recreation summer camp. The program also provides information about these health and wellness resources to other community organizations (church camps, YMCA, etc.) that the park and recreation department sponsors as summer feeding sites.

In Kansas City, the weekend food pack program does much more than distribute the packs on Friday afternoons. The children go on trips to grocery stores to learn about food labeling and sample foods that may be new to them and to dairy farms to see how milk is produced and processed. Children attend classes on how to make healthy snacks, taught by the University of Missouri-Kansas City Extension, and parents are also invited to these classes. In addition, the children play Healthy Hurdles, a game involving healthy food choices that has an exercise component, plant vegetables outside, and receive nutritional fact sheets and recipes in their food packs.

Bakersfield Parks and Recreation partners its feeding program with healthy eating cooking classes and community gardening year-round. Last summer, the local school district arranged for a produce vendor to come to the city recreation center for a day as a way to promote healthy eating. It was open to the children in the summer day camp and the general public.

## Practice #5: Building Family and Community Food Security

# An empty cupboard is full of worry

### What is Food Insecurity?

It is not often that we hear about Americans starving to death, yet each day there are millions of people, both children and adults, who experience food insecurity and outright hunger.

**Household food insecurity** is defined as uncertainty about having, or not being able to acquire, enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle for all household members because of insufficient money or other resources.<sup>20</sup> Food insecurity is a precursor to hunger and accompanying undernourishment and has far-reaching physical, emotional, and psychological effects. Research has found that children in food-insecure households face higher risks of health and development problems compared to children in otherwise similar but food-secure households.<sup>21</sup> Food insecurity also undermines the economic foundation and social fabric that hold communities together.

**Community food insecurity** occurs when significant numbers of community residents are unable to obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system.<sup>22</sup> Community food insecurity results from inadequacies in the food system, including the lack of community self-reliance in the production of food and social inequities in access to food. Examples of programs focused on preventing and/or decreasing community food insecurity are community and school gardens, farm to cafeteria programs, cooking

classes for children and adults, and programs to support small, local grocery stores in selling fresh produce. Feeding programs, such as those participating in NRPA's Serving Communities Initiative, are another way of addressing community food insecurity.

### How prevalent is food insecurity in the U.S.?<sup>23</sup>

In 2010, almost 15% of U.S. households were food insecure to varying degrees, and nearly 49 million people lived in food-insecure households. A total of 16.2 million children lived in food-insecure households. As would be expected, the prevalence of food insecurity increased in response to the national recession. Between 2005 and 2007, about 11% of households had food insecurity, increasing to 15% in 2008 and remaining about the same through 2010.

The prevalence of food insecurity varies considerably among households with different characteristics. Households that are more likely to be food insecure are: those with incomes below federal poverty (40% in 2010), single female-headed households with children (35%), single male-headed households with children (25%), Latino households (26%) and African-American households (25%).

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## Key strategies in addressing community food insecurity

Programs successful at focusing on community food security tend to:

- Assess the underlying causes of food insecurity
- Provide activities for children and youth that promote understanding of and connections to food sources, for example, produce gardening
- Provide activities that teach food preparation
- Offer family activities to increase nutritional knowledge and food preparation skills
- Participate in other community food security activities, such as food policy councils or community food assessments

WhyHunger, an anti-poverty and anti-hunger advocacy organization, also recommends connecting with local farms or community gardens as a food source for the program and as an opportunity for program participants to grow their own food.<sup>24</sup>



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Building Family and Community Food Security

### Increasing family and community food security

Community-based children's feeding programs, like those of the NRPA grantees, help to build food security in a number of ways. By providing low-income children one or more meals per day for at least part of the year, feeding programs help families of participating children to stretch their budgets, which may enable them to provide more and better food for all family members. Other ways in which NRPA's grantees have enhanced family or community food security include:

- Educating children and families on how to prepare healthy food on a budget
- Sending children home on weekends and school holidays with backpacks filled with nutritious food to help feed all children in the family during times when food is not available at their school or community program

- Providing opportunities for the children they serve to work in community gardens and learn how to grow food
- Making free or low-cost meals available to the general community
- Raising community awareness of hunger through outreach efforts

### Educating children and families on how to prepare healthy food on a budget

Offering cooking classes and distributing recipes and cook books to children and families on how to prepare low cost, healthy meals was the most commonly used strategy to promote family food security.

- In Bakersfield, the recreation center offers a free, year-round Healthy Eating class for children aged 5 to 17 that participants in the after-school program or summer camp

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can attend. The classes focus on how to cook nutritious foods and how to make healthy food choices.

- The Kansas City program offers year-round cooking classes to both adults and school-age children at city recreation centers through the University of Missouri-Kansas City Extension and Harvesters, a regional food bank. Participants also receive recipes and 10 pounds of food after each class. Healthy cooking demonstrations and nutritious snacks are often part of community events at city recreation centers (e.g., Halloween parties and basketball clinics).
- The St. Petersburg summer and after-school feeding program distributes a cook book of healthy, low-cost recipes that was produced by dietitians at the local children's hospital. Hospital staff also provide nutrition education classes targeted at middle-school children who attend summer programs at recreation center sites. In addition, the program also organizes an annual family night, in which there is a cooking demonstration, food-tasting, and recipes to send home.
- The New Bedford program sponsors Healthy Meal Nights, providing sit-down family meals at schools during the school year. Professional chefs teach families how to cook healthy, low-cost meals, prepare a dinner that families eat together, and send home recipes with food shopping lists.

### Weekend food packs

Having enough food to last through weekends and holidays, times when children do not receive food at school or community programs, can be challenging for low-income families. The Kansas City feeding program provides weekend food packs to children through its NRPA grant and food donated by the local food bank and a local grocery store. In addition, children who

receive weekend food packs get recipes for low-cost, nutritious dishes in their packs. The Brownsville-Haywood County program partners with the school district and a local church to provide children with weekend food packs.

### Community gardens

Through community gardens, not only do the children get to eat what they grow — they also learn how to produce food in their own yards. The feeding programs in Bakersfield, Greenfield, Kansas City, and Washington, D.C. offer opportunities for the children they serve to work in community gardens at city recreation centers.

With its NRPA funding, the St. Petersburg program purchased grow boxes, self-contained garden containers, that their after-school children use to plant vegetables.

### Making free or low-cost meals available to the general community

Last summer, the Bakersfield summer day camp lunch program was opened to the community. People age 18 and under received a free lunch at the recreation center, and those over 18 received lunch for only \$2.

### Raising community awareness of hunger through outreach efforts

Most of the case-study grantees use multiple activities to publicize their programs. In an effort to reach the target population of low-income families with children, many of the activities — press releases, ads and PSAs in the local media, posters in buses and other public places, booths at school and community events — also reach a much wider audience. Informing the general public about children's feeding programs is a good way of raising awareness about the existence of food insecurity in the community.

## Practice #6: Adopting a Child-centered Focus

# The young will lead the way

Traditionally, children have been viewed as service recipients, a population that passively receives care and community resources. However, models of positive childhood development argue for communities and programs to see children as contributors. A review of the research on the characteristics of youth programs that are most likely to lead to successful outcomes found that:

“Many providers have found that an effective strategy for engaging young people is to develop programs that are based on youth interests and input and allow opportunities for program participants to belong; ... One way to accomplish this is to involve young people in planning program activities and encourage them to offer feedback on the program structure and activities. When young people are involved in this process and their views are heard, they take ownership and feel a sense of belonging.”<sup>25</sup>

## Key strategies in adopting a child-centered focus

Based on research and practice in positive youth development, successful strategies to encourage youth-centered participation include:

- Encouraging participants to help determine and plan program activities
- Having a role in program implementation — helping to set up, serve food, clean up, and engage younger children in activities
- Asking participants to provide feedback on services and activities
- Sharing evaluation results with participants and encouraging them to provide ideas on program improvement



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Adopting a Child-centered Focus

In some feeding programs, the children who are served have an opportunity to participate in program planning, implementation, and improvement through:

- Youth leadership activities
- Participating in the program evaluation process

### Youth leadership

In St. Petersburg, elementary school children, middle-school children, and high-school teens each have separate youth leadership councils associated with parks and recreation centers. Among their other activities, they work as volunteers at recreation center after-school and summer programs, including the feeding program. Youth in these leadership groups often help to plan activities in programs for younger children and programs in which they themselves

participate. When they become young adults, former youth leaders are sometimes hired as recreation center staff.

In Philadelphia, a pilot project was initiated in which members of four recreation center youth councils met with staff twice a month for training in nutrition, physical activity, and healthy lifestyles. The goal of the project was for youth council members, who ranged in age from 10 to 13, to share what they learned with their peers and encourage them to adopt healthy habits. The program hopes to expand to more youth councils.

Teens that participate in the West Bend summer feeding program are encouraged to plan activities for and work with the younger children. Jackie Maynard, the program coordinator, believes that giving teens that kind of responsibility increases their investment in the program.

In the healthy cooking class that children in the Bakersfield program can attend, older children (mostly middle school children) can sign up a week in advance to come to the class a little early and help the instructor set up. Many more than the two who are needed each week want to help, so the sign-up sheet is never empty.

### Children's participation in the program evaluation process

Feedback from youth provides first-hand information with which to make program improvements. A number of grantees get feedback from the children they serve on a regular basis in the form of food quality rating questionnaires (St. Petersburg, Greenville, Kansas City, Washington, D.C.) and taste-testing of potential menu choices (Philadelphia).

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## Practice #7: Becoming a Learning Organization

# What you don't know *can* hurt you

### Why is evaluation beneficial?

Increasingly, budget offices, funders, and residents are requiring accountability. It is not enough to report that programs are being implemented as intended and activities are being held in the numbers projected. Stakeholders want to know the impacts of these efforts. Are participants increasing their physical activity levels? Are children who receive nutrition education more knowledgeable about healthy eating habits? Are parents satisfied with the meals served? Answering these kinds of questions makes a compelling story of success that simply counting participants and enumerating activities cannot equal.

Most program managers believe they are in touch with participants' points of view. But understanding what participants want and what works can't come from anecdotes or chance conversations with a few participants, their parents, or staff. Valid and convincing assessment requires a grasp of evaluation principles and use of evaluation methods that brings in the voices of all or a representative sample of participants and offers robust empirical evidence about program effectiveness.

### What is evaluation?

Evaluation can be defined in a variety of ways, but the following is a definition that may be most relevant to child feeding programs:

Evaluation is the systematic way that data are assembled into a picture of (1) how well an organization is delivering its services and (2) the impact of those services on the target population.<sup>26</sup>

There are three major categories of evaluation, and all three can provide feeding programs with meaningful evidence of their quality and impacts.

### How should evaluation be used?

A useful program evaluation should tell staff something about the program and its effects on participants. It will help staff not only understand their successes, but also provide the information needed to improve the program. What are the best things that a program has to offer? Is it meeting its intended goals? Does it make a difference in the lives of the children served?

More specifically, evaluation should be used as key input for:

- Program management
- Accountability
- Identifying lessons learned
- Program sustainability

### Evaluation for program management

Too often, there is no time in the busy day of program managers to step back and view the program from a more dispassionate perspective, to ask, "Is this working?" "How well is this working?" "What needs to get better?" or "What should we discontinue?" Even with time allotted in staff meetings for these questions, there is typically too little objective information by which to formulate a valid answer. Good evaluation data will provide managers with information that can help design, shape, and refine programs so they best meet program goals.

## Evaluation for program accountability

Evaluation is an essential tool for compliance with funders who want accountability for resources allocated. The thoughts of one group in Virginia about the value of what it calls “Results-based Accountability” are instructive for park and recreation feeding programs:<sup>27</sup>

- Outcomes assessment assures funders and the public that its investments are paying off.
- Management by outcomes allows funders, the public and elected officials to focus on the “what,” while recreation professionals focus on the “how.”
- A staff focus on desired results reduces the chance that resources will be devoted to activities that do not contribute to participant or community improvement.
- Outcomes assessment can expose whether programs are adequately resourced. A focus on results often forces the question of whether outcome expectations must be scaled back or project activities and investments must be increased.

## Evaluation for learning

The learning model of evaluation proposes that outcome measures are the culmination of a process in which program resources are expended to deliver services to individuals, families or communities. For service providers, outcomes play a special role. Rather than being an end result, outcomes are an integral part of a feedback loop. Monitoring outcomes should always result in review and evaluation of the program’s goals, the adequacy of its resources, and the effectiveness of its activities. The time and energy spent in evaluation will be worthwhile only if staff take all that they have learned about the program — where it works and where it falls short — and feed that learning back into program improvement.

## Evaluation for sustainability

Evaluation results that show a program is indeed accomplishing or making progress toward its goals can be used to secure additional funding or maintain what already is allocated. In the budget competition within local governments, recreation services must make a compelling case for itself, especially when compared with other services such as water, police, and fire. The possibility that the city manager or city council will be motivated to fund a program based on outcomes often creates the greatest motivation for recreation staff to participate in outcome assessment. By devoting the resources necessary to conduct evaluations on a regular basis, recreation staff invest in an effort that can demonstrate great return on public investment.

## Key strategies in evaluation

Programs that are successful in conducting and using evaluation:

- Identify program goals, objectives, and performance measures well in advance of implementing their evaluation
- Regularly track program activities and outcomes
- Systematically measure program outputs (how many children attended nutrition education last year?) and outcomes (how much did their knowledge of healthy food choices increase?)
- Regularly communicate evaluation results to staff, funders, participants, and other stakeholders
- Use evaluation data to improve services
- Encourage organizational learning
- Use evaluation findings for grant writing

Figure 4: Types of Evaluations



Questions for process and outcome evaluation adapted from: US Department of HHS: Physical Activity Handbook, Atlanta GAn-School Program

### EVALUATION AMONG NRPA GRANTEES

Relatively few of the 30 NRPA grantees conducted surveys of participating children or their parents. Thirty percent, nine out of 30, conducted parent surveys; 20%, six out of 30, conducted children's surveys (Table 5). These findings suggest that evaluation involving children and parents is an area in need of further development among the grantee feeding programs.

Parents	Children
30%	20%

Source: NRPA Serving Communities – Healthy Meals for Children Initiative Evaluation. Summer 2011 Results.



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Becoming Learning Organizations

### Children as evaluation resources

Regular feedback from the children served provides vital information with which to make program improvements. Kerry Bittner, manager of the feeding program at St. Petersburg Parks and Recreation, stated,

*"We do a survey with our youth each summer. And every element that we offer ... we have them score in rank order ..."*

Kerry's menus rotate every three weeks in a 10-week summer session, so he asks the children to rate the food in about the seventh week, after the children have had two menu rotations.

A number of other programs also distribute feedback questionnaires to children at the end of the after-school or summer session that asks them to rate the food they were served as well as other aspects of the program (Greenville, Kansas City, Washington, D.C.). Greenville uses its results to let the vendor know if the children

are growing tired of a particular food or if the hot food isn't hot enough. Kansas City gives children a pre/post test on nutrition to see how much they learned about healthy food choices. The Philadelphia program asks children to taste-test new foods they are considering offering.

### Integrating staff and volunteers into evaluation

Grantees also ask site staff (St. Petersburg, Washington, D.C) or volunteers who serve the meals (Brownsville-Haywood County) to provide feedback about which foods worked well, which foods did not, food distribution logistics, etc. In St. Petersburg, both the supervisory staff and staff directly involved in feeding the children (usually the front desk staff and youth workers) provide weekly feedback (daily if there is a problem that needs immediate attention).

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## Parent feedback

Parents are also asked to fill out feedback questionnaires in some case-study programs (Kansas City, St. Petersburg). At the end of the program session, parents are asked to not only rate the food their children were served but also broader aspects of the program. In contrast, the Greenville program surveyed parents before the after-school feeding program got started to find out whether the parents wanted the children to be served dinner.

## Practice #8: Feeding Children Around the Block

# There's no place like home

Although many recreation centers are located right in the middle of the neighborhoods they serve, several case-study grantees developed ways to feed children in small groups on or near the blocks where they live. For children who live too far from the recreation center, are too young to walk or ride their bikes, have parents who cannot provide transportation to the recreation center, or who live in rural areas, bringing the food to where the children live can be an effective way to increase access.

## Key strategies in feeding children around the block

Programs that are successful in feeding children on their own blocks:

- Provide compelling communications to neighbors so that the program is widely supported
- Identify safe locations for food delivery
- Have a designated resident to coordinate and monitor food distribution
- Assure adequate shelter from heat and storms during the summer
- Make the occasion of food distribution fun for children and families
- Celebrate the participation of volunteers from the neighborhood
- Enlist community leaders to tout the service and garner positive news coverage



## Parks and Recreation Organizations Feeding Children Around the Block

Philadelphia Parks and Recreation summer feeding program operates “playstreets.” These are small, residential streets that are blocked off to traffic weekdays between 10 AM and 4 PM. Food is delivered to the site by the feeding program. If desired, playstreets may also receive recreational equipment. Individuals and organizations interested in hosting a playstreet apply to the parks and recreation department. The approval process requires a two-hour training and a petition signed by 75% of the block’s residents agreeing to its use as a playstreet. The individuals responsible for supervising and monitoring food distribution and other activities are basically volunteers, although they are paid a small stipend. In summer 2011, the feeding program provided food to more than 600 playstreets.

The Brownsville-Haywood County summer feeding program offers “shade tree lunches”, in which lunches are served in the yards of

private homes, apartment complexes, public housing projects, and children’s programs run by nonprofit organizations (churches, YMCA, etc.). Neighborhood residents and nonprofits interested in hosting a shade tree site contact the feeding program and agree to monitor the children while they eat. Nancy Cates, Director of Parks and Recreation, believes that the name originally came from a feeding program in a rural part of Tennessee, where there was no easy access to a central feeding location. The coordinator publicized that she would be serving a free children’s lunch under a tree at a specific crossroads and for families to meet her there. For rural areas, especially, this is a great way to make community feeding programs accessible to children.

New Bedford Parks, Recreation and Beaches has 22 of its own sites spread all over the city where meals are provided in the outdoors, including parks, playgrounds, and housing projects,

in addition to over 40 indoor feeding sites belonging to other community organizations. Parks and Recreation also makes use of small “pocket parks” in residential neighborhoods that children can walk to for their lunches. Renee Dufour, Parks and Recreation Director, has a huge wall map of the city in her office. It is covered with pins showing the location of feeding sites all over the city. Her goal is to continue to cover the map with pins.

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# Next Steps

As you consider how your parks and recreation program can begin or sustain feeding programs in your community, remember that you don't have to blaze a new trail to get the job done. There are many feeding programs operating right now that have learned plenty about how to do the job right and the key learnings from some of the best are recorded in this document. Web sites of anti-hunger organizations that are cited in this toolkit can also be great resources.

When low-income children no longer need to worry about having adequate food and when they are turned on to healthy food, so much more than just their daily diet is affected. Feeding programs can become agents for other activities that benefit:

- The children they serve — through health/wellness and youth leadership
- Children's families — with food budgets that go farther and more nutritious cooking
- The neighborhood — with healthier members and lunches for the general public
- The wider community — through broadened awareness about food insecurity and enriching volunteer opportunities

Take the advice you find here that resonates for your community and dive in or give a call to the organizations we have highlighted. The issue of food security is not going away anytime soon and park and recreation agencies are critical to making a real difference in communities across America.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> [www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/FoodSecurity/stats\\_graphs.htm](http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/FoodSecurity/stats_graphs.htm)
- <sup>2</sup> C. Fanning and L. Mcleod. *Serving up Justice. How to Design an Emergency Feeding Program and Build Community Food Security*. New York: WHY (World Hunger Year). 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Nord, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Margaret Andrews, Steven Carlson. *Household Food Security in the United States*, 2009. ERR-108. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Econ. Res. Serv. November 2010
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