



Policy Blog: Rural Non-Congregate SUN Meal Sites in Central Pennsylvania Over Time

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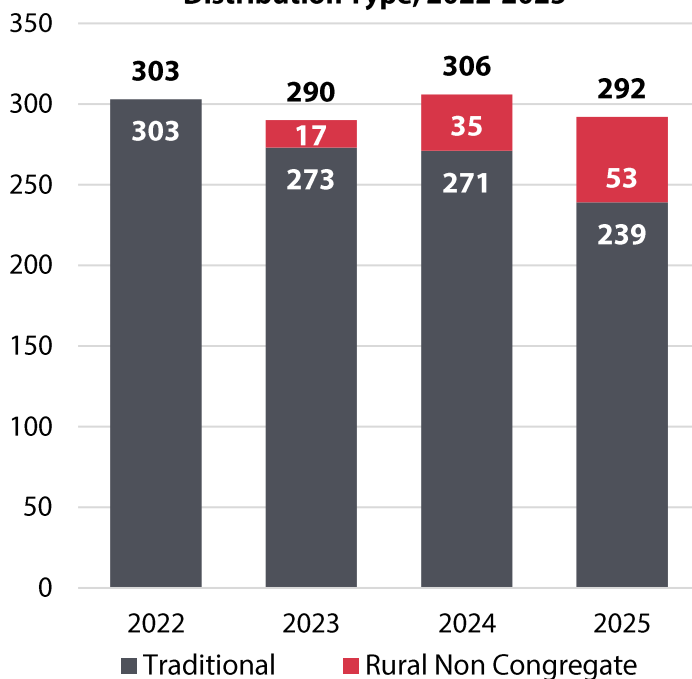
Summer is a time many people associate with a break from work or school and fun in the sun. However, for food insecure families, summertime is often one of the hardest times of the year. Because school is closed, low income children lack access to school meals, which are a critical support.

Although federally funded summer meal programs exist, they are not yet reaching all eligible youth. According to the [Food Research and Action Center](#), just one in eight Pennsylvanian students who received free lunch during the school year also got a summer lunch via the SUN Meal programs (11.8%) as of 2024. In this policy blog, CPFIB Impact and Policy Research assesses the growth of a new tool to expand summer food access: the rural non-congregate provision.

Traditionally, meal services at SUN Meal sites have operated in much the same way as do school meal programs in the fall and winter, in that they generally require a congregate meal service; that is, the children who participate in the program must eat the meal they receive on site at the point of distribution. However, program flexibilities introduced in 2020 as part of pandemic response showed that both school and SUN Meals could operate effectively as non-congregate, grab-and-go style distributions.

Recognizing that transportation barriers like lack of pedestrian infrastructure and sheer distance often prevent children in rural areas from participating in congregate meals at SUN Meal sites, USDA set out to change this reality. In 2023, USDA introduced a permanent program option for SUN Meals that allows sponsors to operate grab-and-go sites open to all children in areas that both qualify to operate the program based on local poverty or free/reduced-price lunch eligibility *and* are designated as rural by the department. The rural non-congregate provision also allow sites to provide up to two weeks' worth of meals at once, further increasing access and reducing travel burden.

SUN Meal Sites in CPFIB Service Area by Distribution Type, 2022-2025



Because of central Pennsylvania's rural nature, many of the areas within CPFIB's service territory that are eligible to participate in SUN Meals are also eligible to offer them as grab-and-go under the rural non-congregate provision. The chart at left shows the total number of SUN Meal sites within the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank's service territory each summer between 2022 and 2025 broken out by distribution model.

Although the total number of SUN Meal sites has stayed relatively steady since 2022, the number of non-congregate rural sites across the CPFIB's 27 counties has shown a clear upward trajectory in the last several years. Just seventeen non-congregate rural sites operated in central Pennsylvania in 2023, the first year of the provision. In 2024, the number of non-congregate sites more than doubled over the previous year, to 35, and in 2025, a total of 53 non-congregate sites extended access even further. As of 2025, non-congregate sites accounted for about one in six total SUN Meal sites across central Pennsylvania.

Summer 2026 is just beginning, so it remains to be seen how much further SUN Meal access will be extended this year via grab-and-go, but the growth over the last few summers is certainly promising, and opportunity for further growth likely remains. The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank is proud to sponsor more than 30 SUN Meal sites, including two non-congregate rural sites, and to support summer food access for children. To learn more about SUN Meals and find a site near you, check out the [USDA site finder!](#)