INTRODUCTION

On an average school day last year, about 300,000 school children in Washington sat down to a free or reduced-price school lunch, which along with school breakfast is a mainstay in the nutrition of children from low-income families.

But only 32,500 of them, a mere 11 percent, received a similar meal last summer when school was out.

Resources to make up for the loss of these meals don't miraculously appear in family budgets—particularly not in the current economic climate. No extra Basic Food (food stamp) benefits are forthcoming, so for tens of thousands of Washington kids, summertime is hungry-time.

Congress created the Summer Food Service Program in 1975 to help fill the gap for hungry children during the summer months. But it's an underutilized program that is now feeling the squeeze as schools shorten summer sessions and nonprofits, parks departments and others look for places to trim back.

The Summer Food program works best in conjunction with summer education, enrichment, and recreation programs. Unfortunately, these programs have experienced significant budget cuts in recent years.

Here in Washington summer meals served peaked in 2002, then dropped off. In 2008, only 13 percent of eligible kids had meals available over the summer. In 2009, despite increased need, only 11 percent of eligible children received a summer meal on an average day in July. Average days served in 2009 were 31 out of approximately 60 days in the summer. For nearly half of the summertime, then, low-income children and their families had no help from the Summer Meal Program in the struggle to make sure children aren't hungry or poorly nourished.

The Summer Meal Program is targeted to serve children in areas where 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals during the school year. If every area that met that threshold served summer meals to all the eligible kids, we'd be serving 80,000 meals a day to hungry kids, instead of 46,000. In fact, there are nearly 140 schools in Washington that meet the 50 percent criteria but have no summer meal programs offered either by the school or a community organization.

It's time to turn the tide and increase access to summer meals for hungry kids in Washington. This report outlines the need for summer meals, the consequences of continuing to allow the number of children served to drop, the benefits of summer meals for kids, and ways we can bring together federal, state, local, private, and public resources to feed more hungry kids.

NOTE: An earlier version of this report estimated that 46,000 children received a summer meal on an average day in July 2009. On further analysis, based upon the methodology utilized by the Food Research and Action Center for their annual summer nutrition reports, we reduced the average daily participation estimate for July to 32,500 children. The higher number reflected the average daily participation for days programs were offered in July. Our lower estimate divides the total number of lunches served in July 2009 by 22 days, the total number of week days in the month. Underlying data on the number of meals served was provided by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.
THE PLAN TO END CHILDHOOD HUNGER IN WASHINGTON

Ending childhood hunger isn’t complicated; we need to ensure that kids have access to nutritious meals where they live, learn and play. In 2008 the Children’s Alliance, in partnership with Share Our Strength, convened Washington stakeholders and developed a plan to end childhood hunger in Washington by 2018. Federal child nutrition programs are our strongest allies in this effort, along with broader efforts that focus on family-wage jobs and other supports for families with children.

Goal Three in the plan is focused on increasing access to summer meals for hungry children. Steps to achieving this goal include:

• Increasing site locations so they are accessible in more communities, particularly those in rural and underserved areas
• Making sure that families know about the program, eligibility requirements, and locations
• Providing safe ways for kids to get to the sites
• Keeping the sites open often enough (days) and long enough (hours) for families to rely on them
• Improving program quality, including the nutritional quality and appeal of food served

The End Childhood Hunger plan, and the coalition developed to put it into effect, provides a platform for meeting the challenge of expanding access to nutritious summer meals. The final section of this report outlines changes at the federal, state, and local levels that can make a significant difference for hungry children in Washington during the summer months.

10 Goals for the End Childhood Hunger Washington strategic plan:

1. Families with low incomes efficiently receive Basic Food support (food stamps) that is sufficient to meet their needs.
2. All children eat a healthy, appealing breakfast and lunch at school.
3. Children and youth eat healthy meals in their communities throughout the summer.
4. Low-income children and families have access to affordable food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, in their communities.
5. All pregnant women, infants and young children have a healthy, balanced diet.
6. Young children have healthy food available in early learning and childcare programs.
7. Families with low incomes can achieve greater economic security and build assets.
8. Food banks and meal programs are readily available and provide nutritious meals to those who need to supplement their family’s food options.
9. Children and youth eat healthy snacks and meals in after-school programs.
10. Children and families have the knowledge and skills to make healthy food choices through effective nutrition education.
SUMMERTIME CHILDHOOD HUNGER

The most recent data on food insecurity we have comes from the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, which issued a report in September 2009 on food insecurity in households with children across America. “Food insecurity” is the term the USDA uses to describe the lack of consistent access to adequate food. “Low and very low food security” is used to describe households where the children experience food insecurity to the extent that regular meal patterns are disrupted and food intake is reduced to less than the amount that their caregivers considered adequate. In simpler terms, these are families where children go hungry.

Here in Washington, 11.1 percent of total households were food insecure in the period 2006 to 2008. Among households with children, 16.4 percent were food insecure and 8.5 percent experienced low or very low food security reaching the children in the household. This means that in approximately 65,800 Washington households children were hungry.

The USDA report does not discuss seasonal food insecurity, but other data and anecdotal evidence suggest that there are particularly hungry times of year. Washington data from the Department of Health Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey found that household food insecurity increased in early spring and late summer in households with children. Community food banks see major increases in demand for help during the summer months from families with children.

Moving to a neighboring town can mean losing summer meals

When Lisa’s son, Sebastian, comes home, he is hungry. Sebastian is 16 and growing like a weed. He can put away a quart of milk in an afternoon,

That makes feeding him and his sister, Emma, age five, an expensive proposition. For a single mother who works as a home health aide to the elderly, as Lisa does, it’s a serious challenge. When Lisa was laid off last September, it got a lot tougher.

Summer doesn’t make things easier. When the school year ends, so do the free lunches her kids get everyday at school. Last summer, Lisa and her children lived in Redmond and the kids were able to get free meals there through the federal Summer Food Service Program, designed to make up for the loss of school meals that low-income families rely on. This year, she looked for a similar program in Issaquah. The nearest one is in Renton, out of reach without a car.

How did Lisa make $400 a month in food stamps feed Sebastian and Emma last summer?

“A lot of Super Noodles and sandwiches,” she says. “No fresh fruit, no vegetables, no milk.”

Over the school year, Lisa managed to stretch her unemployment checks and food stamps to feed Emma and Sebastian by taking the bus to Fred Meyer, which has better prices than the small market near her home, and walking to the food bank every week.

Lisa is hopeful about getting another job as a caregiver. She doesn’t complain about the stretching and figuring she does to get her kids fed. “Most of the time, it’s not too bad, but when it gets to bare minimum...” She pauses, as if she doesn’t want to go further, anywhere close to complaining. “It’s hard.”
Hunger is not evenly distributed across the state either. The BRFSS survey found that food insecurity among all households was significantly higher than the state average in eight counties: Adams, Pacific, Asotin, Klickitat, Yakima, Okanogan, Franklin, and Chelan.

Ironically, families in rural areas can be the hardest to reach through summer meal programs because of simple geography. Getting meals to children who live far apart can be difficult, but several organizations have demonstrated that it can be done.

The consequences of childhood hunger can be severe. Hungry children are more likely to miss school due to illness. Food insecurity creates irritability and aggression; it can also result in lethargy and isolation. All of these impacts rob children of opportunities to learn and play and grow.

While some areas of the state see higher levels of food insecurity and hunger among children, in every community there is the need for safe activities for children during the summer months. Parents of all incomes greet summer as a mixed blessing—those who work must line up activities for their kids to make sure they are happy and well supervised. For low-income working parents, the options tend to be limited.

The availability of free or very low-cost summer programs for children has narrowed over the past several years as budget cuts at the local, school district, and state level have been implemented.
In Spokane, a 100-year-old program of drop-in recreation in the parks abruptly ended in 2005, eliminating the thousands of meals served through the program over the summer. School districts reduced the number of sites they served this summer due to building closures. More districts are already letting communities know that there will be no summer school in 2010.

Even the programs that do continue may well get shorter. As noted above, many programs operate for only a few weeks or during abbreviated summer school sessions. Out of 151 sponsors in 2009, less than 60 provided meals for 40 days or more during the summer. A summer meal program that lasts only a week or so does not address summertime hunger.

Children who do not have access to quality summer programs experience learning loss during the summer. Studies find that low-income children have higher rates of summer learning loss than their higher-income peers, but that high-quality summer programs can ameliorate the loss. The Feed Your Brain project, a collaboration between School’s Out Washington, the Discuren Foundation and the Children’s Alliance to add literacy activities to summer meal programs in rural communities, has found that students engaged in the program not only avoid summer learning loss—they gain a year in reading ability!

The Feed Your Brain program in Shelton is held at Choices High School, where children participate in a summer 4-H camp while some of their parents take literacy classes. As the success of the Shelton program indicates, offering an array of activities brings more kids in to summer meal programs while also keeping them safe and off the streets.

A thriving summer food program built on activities for kids and adults

It’s summer, but Shelton’s Choice High School is buzzing. Mothers are trooping in from literacy classes to join their children for lunch. Upstairs, dozens of children are attending the 4-H summer camp, learning science and reading skills, and working on arts and crafts projects. It’s a swim day, and the kids are antsy to get to the pool.

Lori Chappell, the 4-H summer day camp coordinator, expertly herds everyone into the auditorium-cum-lunchroom. She watches with satisfaction as the children wolf down their sandwiches, milk, and fruit. No one leaves anything behind.

Shelton is a hungry place. This timber town’s economy was depressed even before the recent national downturn, and more than half of the children in the district receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year. Summer puts parents in a bind. So the program Lori helps run is crucial to keeping at least some of the town’s kids fed through the summers.

The summer meals program is well run. By being integrated with a strong summer camp and with services for parents, it has no problem drawing 50 to 100 kids a day. Choice High School is conveniently located in the middle of Shelton, which, unusually for a small town, has a bus system that makes it easy for families to get to the site.

Still, Lori isn’t satisfied. She wishes she could serve more meals. Although there have been announcements on local radio about the summer meals at the high schools, she thinks many hungry families don’t know about them. “Nobody is walking off the street. But I know there are hungry kids out there,” she says.

Lori is frustrated that the other summer meal site in town, Shelton High School, is out of town and less accessible and meals are no longer served at the downtown park.

Lori is passionate about helping families, and her eyes light up when she mentions that she finally did get a walk-in: A new family wandered by and got lunch. It made her day.
TOOLS FOR ADDRESSING SUMMERTIME HUNGER

The plan to end childhood hunger in Washington focuses primarily on maximizing participation in the federal nutrition programs: SNAP (formerly food stamps; called Basic Food here in Washington), National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, WIC, and the Summer Food Service Program. These federal programs offer steady, reliable sources of food for families and children—something that food banks, by definition, are not designed to do. Communities in need require both the availability of food in a crisis as well as the greater stability offered through federal programs.

The nation’s primary defense against hunger, Basic Food, serves over 800,000 people in Washington, which represents a 40 percent increase from June 2008 to June 2009. This increase reflects the impact of both the recession and changes Washington made to program rules in October 2008 to allow more working families to apply for and receive benefits. While Basic Food benefits have increased slightly due to the 2008 Farm Bill and the 2009 economic stimulus package, families are still hard pressed to make their benefits last the entire month.

Most people supplement Basic Food benefits with cash, if they have it, and/or emergency food assistance from community food banks. Food banks in Washington have reported a 30 percent increase in demand for their services over the past year.

Basic Food benefits do not increase in the summer months when children do not have access to school breakfast and lunch. This means that families must look elsewhere to make up for losing school meals. If children are in child care, they may be receiving assistance from the Child and Adult Care Food Program. If children are under five, they may be receiving supplemental foods through the WIC program. WIC is not designed to meet all the nutritional needs of participating children, however.

The primary vehicles for providing meals to children in the summertime are the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). School districts may choose to continue providing meals through the lunch program year-round. They have two options: use the lunch program just to serve children attending summer school programs, or utilize what’s called the “seamless” program to provide meals for summer school students and community children who only come for meals. In 2009, 37 school districts utilized the seamless option.

The Summer Food Service Program may be operated by school districts, public entities such as parks departments, nonprofits, and tribes. Here in Washington, 151 organizations offered the Summer Food Service Program in 2009, comprised of 105 school districts, eight cities, 25 nonprofits, and six tribes. The program was also offered at seven camps or college Upward Bound programs. In 2009, slightly fewer school districts operated the program than in the previous years, but more nonprofits and tribes provided meals.

Most sites can serve a maximum of two meals per day or a meal and a snack. Summer food sponsors can feed children at numerous sites throughout the community such as schools, parks, low-income housing locations, or community parks and pools—essentially any place children gather during the summer months.

Summer food sites can either operate as “open” or “enrolled” sites. An “open” site is one located in a low-income area where at least 50 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. The site is then open to all children in the community ages 18 and under. At an “enrolled” site, only children enrolled in the summer program can participate.
Summer camps (both residential and non-residential) and summer food sites that serve primarily migrant children can also participate in summer food and can serve up to three meals a day.

Summer food sites do not need to provide enrichment or educational activities. Children can simply gather at a school, park or other community site to eat their meal or snack without any type of programming taking place at the site. Most sponsors would agree, however, that programs with activities are the best as they attract more children and keep kids busy and safe along with providing meals.

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**There’s only so much one extraordinary individual can do**

Twelve-year-old Jessie Morris laughs at the face her 10-year-old sister, Jackie, makes as she pushes the vanilla yogurt aside. Jessie eats her yogurt and both girls tear into the rest of the lunch at Cedar Valley School as their grandmother, Kathy, watches.

Kathy is delighted that she can get free lunches for her granddaughters at this Lynnwood school. As a widow who cares for the girls during the week—they stay with her while their parents work 12-hour shifts, five days a week—she needs help like this to make ends meet. She looks around the lunch tables and says she wishes more kids were here.

On a typical day last summer, anywhere from a dozen to 50 kids ate free lunches in Cedar Valley’s lobby. Yet during the school year, nearly 80 percent of its 500 students receive free or reduced-price lunches. It’s those hungry students that motivate Leann Tronsdal, the school office manager, who stepped up to serve summer meals. Serving food isn’t her job, but when, like many districts across the state, the school eliminated its summer school to save money, and therefore eliminated summer meals, she couldn’t sit by.

During the school year, Tronsdal regularly sees children who complain of tummy aches, then admit they had no breakfast. Teachers know to send these kids to her office, where she keeps a supply of breakfast bars and other snacks. Where does the funding come from?

Leann is silent for a long moment. “There really isn’t funding for it. There’s a little bit of money raised by the PTSA, and a volunteer group,” she explains. “There’s my own wallet.”

Tronsdal wasn’t one to let a budget problem keep her from feeding kids this summer. She arranged to drive every day to the Everett School District and pick up meals. She contacted community groups, including the Kiwanis, the Girl Scouts, and A New Day Church adjacent to the school, to ask for volunteers to help her set up and serve the meals and clean up after. She arranged to send flyers home, posted notices at nearby low-income housing, and placed announcements in the Everett Herald. That’s how Kathy Morris found out about the meals.

But it’s hard to find the Cedar Valley School. Mapquest and Google will send you astray, and even if you know where you’re going, the school is not adjacent to much besides big box stores and major arterials. There’s no reason for families to wander by in the summer, little way for them to see from the outside that they can eat here, and nothing to do here but eat the meals Tronsdal serves. Tronsdal’s extraordinary efforts paid off for dozens of families, but the unmet need is far greater. There’s only so much Tronsdal can do on her own.
SUMMER MEALS IN WASHINGTON

Summer meals served in Washington initially peaked in 2002 when 42,000 children received meals on an average day in July, usually the peak month for summer meals. The number of children served declined every year after that until 2008 and 2009, when there were small increases in children served.

In the years leading up to 2002, a variety of outreach and program promotion strategies were utilized to encourage local communities to organize to feed children during the summer months. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Child Nutrition Services contracts with schools and other community groups for summer meals. Reimbursement is provided based on the number of meals served; most of the approximately $3.00 per meal provided is for the meal itself. A tiny amount is provided for administration. OSPI reaches out each year to all school districts and many community agencies to announce the availability of program funds and encourage participation.

During the 1990s, the Children's Alliance also received funds from the federal Community Food and Nutrition Program (CFNP) to conduct outreach to grow the number of Summer Food sites. The Children's Alliance convened summer meal conferences, coordinated community meetings in areas of the state without programs, developed guidebooks and outreach materials, and conducted specific outreach to tribes. These efforts resulted in consistent increases in program participation in the years leading up to 2002. Funds for the Community Food and Nutrition Program were eliminated in the FY 2006 federal budget and have not been restored.

Despite lack of resources for community outreach on summer meals, a number of encouraging actions and trends have emerged:

1. In 2007, Congress extended “simplification” provisions for summer meals to all states. This action meant that sponsors providing meals no longer had to conduct extensive cost accounting for the program. Meals were instead to be reimbursed at a flat rate per meal served.

2. School districts continue to develop effective models for increasing summer meal participation by taking the meals to the kids. The Auburn and Kent school districts in south King County operate school buses that deliver meals to apartment complexes in low-income areas. In Kent the kids can eat inside the bus in rainy weather. Auburn not only delivers the meals, but food service workers also set up a buffet line and serve hot entrees, salads, and organic produce.

3. Community food banks are joining the list of nonprofits offering the summer meal program. The Copalis Beach Food Bank pioneered delivering meals to parks and other sites along the coast. In 2009, Bonney Lake Food Bank and St. Leo’s Food Connection in Pierce County, and the Thurston County Food Bank provided meals to hundreds of kids in schools, parks, and community centers, as well as at food banks.

4. The Feed Your Brain program just completed its ninth year of providing small grants to rural community programs that package nutritious meals with literacy activities. A variety of private foundations have followed the lead of the Discuren Foundation to fund this effort, which is administered by School’s Out Washington. This year, five programs were awarded three-year grants, which include training and support.

5. State legislators joined with advocates in 2009 to include a provision establishing a new, fall grant cycle for summer meal start-up funds for communities in the Feeding Hungry Children Act (SB 5361, HB 1416). Although the bills died in fiscal committees, discussions are underway to include funds for these capacity-building grants in the 2010 Supplemental Budget. The legislature already provides $70,000 per year in spring start-up grants to help programs purchase equipment needed for summer meal programs.

6. Reauthorization of child nutrition programs by Congress in 2010 provides another opportunity to strengthen the summer meals program and position it for new expansion nationwide.
SUMMER 2009: WHO ATE AND WHO DIDN’T

The current economic situation in Washington has meant steep growth in the number of low-income children in Washington needing nutrition assistance. As of October 1, 2009, 433,000 children in Washington schools qualified for free or reduce-price school meals, 42 percent of all students, an increase of over 33,000 students from October 2008.

Debbie Webber, Food and Nutrition Department Manager for Everett Public Schools, told us: “The number of families eligible for free meals has increased by 20 percent this past year. Parents were calling our office before school started, unlike previous years, to make sure that their children would have free food on the first day of school. I sensed desperation.”

At the same time, major state budget cuts were made in education and human services. School districts struggled to make late decisions about whether to continue summer programs, because state funding allocations didn’t come through until late in the school year. A few districts dropped summer programs completely, and thus summer meals. More are indicating that they will not operate in summer 2010. Community agencies stepped up in key areas of the state in 2009, but public agencies like parks departments continue to face cuts.

Providing meals through the summer meals program is particularly difficult in rural areas because funds provided are not sufficient to purchase transportation services in communities that do not have some kind of transit system. In other communities there are no buses to use. Despite this significant barrier, summer programs do exist and flourish in rural communities where enough kids live close to sites or where the program can piggy-back on school or other programs that provide transportation.

Cuts to summer schools and recreation mean fewer kids get summer meals

Sandy Sulgrove, the food services director for the Chewelah School District in Eastern Washington, loves her job feeding kids. But driving through Chewelah delivering summer meals put her in a bind. “You want to just stop the bus and hand any child you see a lunch,” she says. That’s against the rules, so she kept driving, taking the meals to the sites where they’re supposed to be served.

Sandy is a native of Chewelah, and so she knows nearly everybody in the small town (population 2,300), knows how much everyone is struggling, and how hungry the kids are. She watched the major employer, an Alcoa plant nearby, close down back in 2001 and the timber industry decline. She jokes that Chewelah is a retirement community, by which she just means there’s no work in town.

So when tightening budgets sparked talk in the district of canceling the summer meals program, Sandy pushed to keep it going. She took care of the daunting paperwork and spread the word around town that any child could eat the lunches, regardless of income. Paradoxically, the recession pushed attendance down a bit. The main draw to one site was swim lessons at the town pool, but Sandy says many families could no longer afford the lessons. So their kids didn’t get the lunches either.

Some of the sites reduced the length of their summer meals programs. Summer school at the high school lasted only a week, and at the middle school summer school was cut from five days a week to four. It’s a pattern that was repeated around the state last summer: Summer school is often one of the first things to go as schools are forced to trim their budgets. That means summer meals go too, just when families most need them.

Still, for a small town, Chewelah fed a lot of kids last summer. On some days, more than a hundred kids ate lunch at the town park.

Sandy loves that. “Knowing that they’re at least getting that one meal, it’s pretty satisfying,” she says.
Data for summer meals in 2009 show:

- 151 sponsoring agencies provided meals at over 700 sites; the number of sponsors and sites in 2009 was virtually the same as in 2008.
- Less than 60 of these sponsors served meals for 40 days or longer (the summer is 55 to 60 days long); the average number of days meals were served statewide was 31.
- The City of Seattle Summer Sack Lunch program accounts for 105 of these sites.
- Pierce County had the largest number of new sites at 18, representing a 24 percent increase.
- Kittitas, Jefferson, Skamania, Wahkiakum, and Lincoln counties had no sponsors or sites.
- Franklin, Chelan, and Whatcom counties each lost between five and seven sites, cutting 32 to 47 percent of their meal serving capacity. Yakima County lost eight sites.
- Among new sponsors this year were the Thurston County Food Bank, First Step Family Support Center in Port Angeles, Kettle Falls School District in Stevens County, Washougal School District in Clark County, Children of the Valley Afterschool Program in Skagit County, Endicott School District in Whitman County, Kalispel Tribe of Indians in Pend Oreille County, and the Nooksack Indian Tribe in Whatcom County.

### SUMMER MEALS SITES BY COUNTY, 2009

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List does not include camps or Outward Bound programs through universities. Source: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2009.
MAXIMIZING OPPORTUNITIES TO REDUCE SUMMERTIME HUNGER

Through visits to summer meal programs throughout the state during summer 2009, the Children’s Alliance catalogued on-the-ground challenges that face summer meal programs and discourage additional organizations from sponsoring the program. Despite these deterrents, programs in tiny rural areas and crowded cities and suburbs move mountains to make sure kids don’t go hungry in the summer months.

From our observations in the Lower Yakima Valley, South King County, and Mason and Stevens counties:

Great programs are often the product of great leadership.

• In Auburn, the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Kim Herren, demonstrated his commitment to summer food by giving Eric Boutin, Auburn’s new child nutrition director, a four-hour tour of the district, pointing out low-income areas and making it clear that kids in those areas needed good nutrition year-round.

• On a smaller scale, Sandy Sulgrove of the Chewelah School District turns her commitment into action by driving a school bus to serve low-income kids at the pool, in summer school, in child care, and at the park.

Summer meal programs are isolated and don’t have much opportunity to share ideas for meal service, outreach, and promotion.

• School districts are not used to working with community agencies to get the word out about summer food programs. As one child nutrition staffer in the Lower Valley stated, “I’m not sure how to involve other people.”

The fate of summer meal programs is closely tied to the fate of the summer recreation, activity, education, and remediation or enrichment programs. In areas where children must come to a central site for meals, provision of activities ensures higher attendance.

• There must be an organization willing to do the collaborative work needed to bring in activities and coordinate with a wide range of potential funders, contributors, and folks with links in low-income communities. At present, the Summer Meals Program provides no resources for this up-front work.

In areas where a large number of kids live in concentrated areas, like apartment complexes, public housing developments, etc., the best way to reach them is to take the meals to the children who need them.

• Kent uses a bus to take sack lunches and cold milk to the Brookside Apartments, where a large number of low-income children live.

Outreach for summer meals is spotty.

• This summer many sponsors made late decisions about offering summer meals due to state budget cuts, meaning that site information was late reaching Within Reach, the statewide organization that operates the Family Food Hotline and www.parenthelp123.org, a web-based tool that includes a searchable summer meals database.

• There are minimal requirements for outreach in the summer meals program and school districts are not familiar with broader ways to reach out to the community.

• Very localized outreach works best. Some programs use door-hangers to leave information for parents; banners announcing the site attract attention.

• Parents must feel comfortable with site locations. Parents are not likely to allow young children to cross major arterials or walk through unsafe neighborhoods.
Summer meal programs work best when they are the product of community collaborations. Although one organization needs to take the lead in organizing the summer hunger response, collaboration is key to getting the word out, finding good sites, coordinating or offering transportation, providing activities, and keeping kids safe. Here are some great examples of collaboration:

- The City of Seattle Division of Family and Youth sponsors the program in Seattle, while the Seattle School District provides the meals. The program will provide meals to just about any organization hosting summer programs, or any organization willing to provide a site for the meals. In 2009, 105 sites were coordinated by the City including such diverse locations as the Islamic School of Seattle, Somali Community, Yiu Mien Project, and Treehouse. Lawyers Helping Hungry Children help underwrite outreach costs.

- At Shelton’s Choice High School meals are served not just to kids but to their parents taking literacy classes, who join their kids for lunch. Parents may receive summer meals if they pay for them, or if the cost for their meals is covered by another source of funding.

Taking meals to where kids live

With five children ages 11 to two, Cristina Orozco is a busy woman. Keeping all these growing children fed takes a lot of cooking. It also takes a lot of money, which she and her husband, Luis Rivera, don’t have. He works in a restaurant; she takes care of the children full-time.

Summer time adds to the challenge. She has all five children on her hands, and her three older children no longer receive the free meals they get at school during the school year. So Cristina is grateful for the free lunches provided at her apartment complex in SeaTac by New Futures, a nonprofit agency. Last summer, she took her youngest two, Valeria and Ximena, every day, and often the older kids, too. “I’ve come here since the beginning, since they first offered the meals,” she says.

The lunches include the nutritious—and expensive—fruits and vegetables Cristina likes to serve her family but can’t always afford. The family receives only minimal food stamp benefits. Still, Cristina prides herself on never having an empty refrigerator. When money’s tight, she skips fresh produce and makes a lot of pasta and tacos with potatoes or beans.

Cristina keeps watch over Valeria and Ximena as they eat their turkey sandwiches and cookies. During the school year, she volunteers for the PTA at her children’s school, Bow Lake Elementary, helping serve lunches. More than 70 percent of Bow Lake’s students qualify for free meals, and Cristina hates to see any food go to waste. She coaxes children to eat, knowing how the children need the nutrition and how much their parents need them to take advantage of the free food.
MOVING FORWARD TO END SUMMERTIME CHILDHOOD HUNGER

Increasing access to nutritious meals for kids in the summertime will take everyone’s efforts: policy makers, private funders, community organizations, schools, and parents. Everyone has something important to offer.

Congress:
• Congress should seriously consider increasing SNAP (Basic Food) benefits during the summer months for families with children.
• The 2009 Agriculture Appropriations Bill included $85 million in funds to pilot ways to reach more children with nutritious meals in the summertime. Washington should take advantage of these funds by developing a range of projects and educating Washington’s Congressional Delegation about the importance of summer meals.

Federal reauthorization of the Summer Food Service Program in 2010 should include:
• Dropping the 50 percent eligibility standard to 40 percent to allow more areas to operate open sites and serve more children; here in Washington there are 300 schools between 40 and 50 percent
• Increasing reimbursement for the program so that it can be operated by more organizations
• Addressing rural transportation barriers that prevent rural programs from serving more children
• Redirecting funds away from red tape and toward improved food quality by eliminating overly burdensome auditing and regulation, including rules precluding taking non-perishable food off site
• Creating a seamless program for community organizations who want to feed kids after school and during the summer as outlined in Rep. Rick Larsen’s Ensuring All Students Year-round (EASY) Access to Meals and Snacks Act, H.R. 4274.

State Legislature: Washington’s legislature has the opportunity to jumpstart summer meals for kids by continuing a tradition of wise investment to leverage federal funds:
• In 2010 the legislature should appropriate $250,000 to add a second grant cycle to the “Meals for Kids” summer start-up and expansion grants in 2010. Making grants available in the early fall would allow organizations to convene community partners and lay the groundwork for added sites and sponsors. Despite the state’s budget shortfall, it makes sense to invest a little on the front end to feed more hungry children during the summer months, and help communities draw down added federal funds.
• Fall capacity-building grants have the potential to provide the impetus for major program growth statewide, creating 100 to 120 new meal sites and increasing the number of children served to 25 percent of low-income students participating in school lunch, a total of 70,000 children.

Local Government: City and county governments can sponsor the program in conjunction with summer parks programs. In addition, local government can serve as a catalyst to convene summer meal discussions and brainstorms and encourage the development of local plans to ensure kids don’t go hungry in the summertime.

United Ways and other community organizations: Similar to the local government role, community-wide organizations like United Ways can sponsor programs, working with school districts to provide meals and community-based organizations to provide sites.

Community nonprofits and food banks: Food banks have found themselves in new roles in the effort to end childhood hunger. Backpack programs are sprouting up in many communities to help kids make it through the hungry weekends and holidays. This energy can shift into sponsoring summer meals, providing a site for another sponsor, serving as a convener of community groups to plan summer meals or being an advocate for hungry children in broader community discussions.
State and Local funders: The Feed Your Brain literacy grant program has shown the impact that foundation donations can have by focusing on high-need, rural communities and coupling meals with literacy activities. Local funders can “adopt” summer meal sites and provide funds, in-kind contributions and/or volunteers. On a broader level, Lawyers Helping Hungry Children has prioritized childhood hunger and contributes to the Seattle Sack Lunch Program each summer.

Schools: More schools should rise to the challenge of feeding hungry children in the summer months. Schools are well-known community gathering places that are seen as safe by parents. Even if a school district cannot sponsor the program, it can make available school playgrounds for meal sites or vend meals for other sponsors. Many school food service workers would like to work during the summer and can broaden their role in the community by taking on summer meals. Older students are often key to the operation of summer meal programs, taking on paperwork and meal distribution roles.

Parents: Parents are advocates for the needs of their kids. A few parents can successfully advocate with schools and community organizations for summer meals for their children. Parents often help distribute meals and clean up at apartment building sites. Parents are also the most effective means for getting the word out about meals and vouching for the safety of summer sites.

WE ARE LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD SUMMER MEAL FRIENDS!

Want to help feed hungry children next summer in your community? We’re getting organized and we’d love to link you up!

If you’d like to work on federal and state policy and funding for summer meals, contact Linda Stone at the Children’s Alliance, linda@childrensalliance.org or 509.747.7205.

If you’d like to help build summer meal capacity in your community and want to connect with current meal sponsors and other allies, contact Donna Parsons at OSPI, donna.parsons@k12.wa.us., or Janet Freiling at School’s Out Washington, freiling@schoolsoutwashington.org.

If you want to help get the word out about the availability of summer meals in your community next summer, contact Claire Lane at Within Reach, clairel@withinreachwa.org.

One quick and easy way to stay in touch with efforts to feed hungry kids during the summertime: Join the Children’s Action Network and select Summer Meals Providers and Advocates under the Policy Areas list. Click here: http://www.childrenshub.org/calliance/join.html

1 To learn more about Feed Your Brain or contribute to the project, contact Mari Offenbecher at School’s Out Washington, moffen@schoolsoutwashington.org.

2 For information on Lawyers Helping Hungry Children, contact Neal Philip at nphilip@gordonrees.com.
Acknowledgements

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Carolyn McConnell, Children’s Alliance
Ruth Schubert, Children’s Alliance
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