

Summer Meals in the Age of COVID-19

By Marisa Glaviano, Youth Services Coordinator, Licking County Library, Ohio

This is our 5th summer participating in the Summer Food Service Program at the Downtown branch of Licking County Library, roughly 40 miles east of Columbus, Ohio. Though it felt old hat heading into Spring, that all changed in early March as we, like everyone else, had to evaluate if and how to continue our program during a pandemic. Well, maybe not “if,” as I knew from the day our library closed to the public on March 16, 2020 that I would fight to continue Summer Lunches. Luckily, my Director and Public Services Manager are strong supporters of the program, and no fight was required.

However, we knew the program would need to take a new form, as our building is still closed to the public. This is our second year working with Mid-Ohio Food Collective as our sponsor, and my wonderful partner Sha-Wana was great about staying in touch with updates as special exemptions were granted to ensure kids didn't go hungry due to the challenges now facing us all. Furthermore, we, like many of you, are on a skeleton crew until further notice, and until last week I was the only Youth Services person from our typically 10-person team in the building.

Traditionally we'd hosted eat-in Summer Lunch each weekday from noon – 1 PM, but with our drastically reduced staff we wanted to consolidate distribution. We finally landed on distributing a total of ten meals (five breakfasts and five lunches) per child each Monday from 11 AM – 1PM, starting the Monday after the school year ended and going right up until the scheduled start of the school year in August. While I love fresh produce and have always prioritized having a minimally processed menu, this year we are using all shelf stable meals so that we can receive shipment the week before and have time to pack all the meals before Monday morning. Also, I should point out that this format would not have been possible prior to this year, as the SFSP program ordinarily requires children to eat on-site. There are also eligibility guidelines that were relaxed just for this summer. If you are not sure if your library would qualify for the program, make sure to check out the [SFSP FAQ page](#).

We've now had four distribution days, and our program has evolved each week. Our attendance for normal Summer Lunch on any given day could vary from 25 – 100, depending on what programming we hosted that day. With that in mind, we started with daily units for 50 kids (500 meals, as each child receives 10 meals). Because I was holding on to my “fresh is best” mentality, the first week we requested a cold meal for Monday, with shelf stable breakfasts and lunches for the rest of the week. What I didn't consider was that we'd need to receive delivery on Monday mornings, because a cold meal needs to be served within one day of delivery, so we could not accept delivery on Friday. I also didn't consider that we would need to sort and pack the rest of the lunches, I'm just so used to getting the insulated bags, opening them up, and serving them right away. Well, I'm sure you can predict what happened. The delivery was a little late because we're a substantial distance from Mid-Ohio Food Collective, and then we had to sort and pack 500 meals while people waited in the sun because they weren't permitted in the building! We also ran out within 30 minutes once we started serving. It

was not my finest hour, and I felt foolish for not anticipating an increased need during a time when so many are struggling financially.

The next week we increased to 100 daily units (1,000 total meals) and requested delivery the week before. Sha-Wana is amazing and managed to both double our meals and squeeze our delivery into their already packed schedule. We thought we were hot stuff – ready to go the Friday before and with a game plan in place. Well, we ran out in less than 20 minutes. I called Sha-Wana and begged her to quadruple our already increased order to 400 daily units. That's 4,000 meals! Because she serves many sites and would need to drastically increase her orders, we were stalled at 100 for a couple of weeks, but our patrons have been fabulous and understanding when we run out of meals at 11:07. We have 2,500 meals to distribute for our June 29 program – 2,000 daily lunches (400 kids, 5 lunches each), and 500 breakfasts (100 kids, 5 breakfasts each). We will be up to 400 daily units of both lunch and breakfast the week of July 6, and I'm hoping that will keep us in stock for at least an hour! The picture below is the bulk of the meals for our June 29 distribution, with ten more tables in another room. I wish I had pictures of the actual event, but we are so busy and it goes by so quickly that I've never had a chance to take any.



I can't overstate how strongly I encourage you to participate in SFSP if your library qualifies. I have done some truly amazing things as a Youth Librarian, but nothing holds a candle to distributing 1,000+ free meals every week to the kids in our community. And it may not be too late to get started this summer – in my area, most of the other SFSP sites didn't start serving until our third week, and all of them end the last week of July, while our program goes right up until school starts. Predicting need can be tricky, but that is one of the benefits on shelf-stable meals – if we have a ton left over, there is very little waste since everything can be kept for the following week.

Here are a few things to keep in mind if you want to follow a similar plan this year:

- It will take a lot of time, and you will need help. Last week, it took about 10 individual staff hours to receive shipment and sort meals. If I were managing the entire program myself, I wouldn't be able to go up to 400 daily units without devoting my entire work week to summer meals. If you are permitted to use volunteers at this time, packing meals is a great option. Board members want to do something meaningful? Have them pack meals! There are very few people that would say no to feeding kids.
- You will probably need to invest in bags to sort meals into. We use three bags per child – one for milk, one for unitized meals, and one for loose items/fresh fruit. Your sponsor may be able to provide bags, or you may be able to get a donation from a local store.
- You will need space. I suggest reserving an area just for meal prep and staging. Prior to this week, we were staging our meals in our front entryway. Effective this week, we also took over our large meeting room.
- Figure out traffic flow to reduce touching and/or people in the building. We mark doors as one-way and prop them open, so patrons do not need to touch any surfaces. We don't have the staff to stand out front and make sure people waiting are 6 feet apart, but we placed 6-foot markers on the floors inside and post a sandwich board outside reminding people to observe social distancing.
- Be flexible and learn/adapt as you go. We've had at least three program evolutions since we started.
- You may have to prioritize. When we first closed, I was so eager to start virtual programming, distance learning, and reminding our patrons that we're still here even though our buildings are closed. My Public Services Manager encouraged me to slow down and focus on getting Summer Meals under control, and I'm so thankful she did. With the huge increase of need in our community, I am happy to be able to focus so much of my time on Summer Meals.

And finally, reach out to your colleagues who have summer feeding programs for guidance, tips, and advice. We librarians love few things more than sharing knowledge and empowering our communities. Go forth and feed all the kids!