



EXPANDING THE REACH OF THE SUMMER FOOD PROGRAM

The Summer Food Program is a federally funded program that provides more than \$40 million each year to help low-income communities in Texas serve nutritious meals to children in safe, enriching environments during the summer. In Texas, where one-in-four children are at risk for hunger, the Summer Food Program is critically important to ensure every child has the chance to grow into a healthy and productive adult. Texas has one of the largest School Lunch Programs in the nation, serving meals to more than 2.5 million low-income children every day. The Summer Food Program is intended to serve the same population, yet it reaches only a fraction of the low-income children who eat lunch during the school year. This paper compares participation in the Summer Food Program to participation in the School Lunch Program for each county in Texas. It documents Texas' progress in the Summer Food Program, explores the barriers to participation, and makes recommendations for expanding the reach of the program in Texas.

Background

The Summer Food Program¹ is 100-percent federally funded. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the program at the federal level, and the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) runs the program in Texas, contracting with local "sponsors" to operate feeding "sites." TDA received more than \$41 million in federal funds in 2008 to reimburse local sponsors for meals served, freeing up their limited resources to provide recreational and educational activities to kids.

Eligible sponsors include school districts, nonprofit agencies, certain camps, and local government agencies such as a city's parks and recreation division. Most Summer Food Programs are located in communities where at least 50 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.² At these sites, a sponsor may serve meals for free to any child who comes to that site.³ A sponsor is responsible for locating eligible sites; hiring, training, and supervising staff; arranging for meal preparation and/or transportation to sites; monitoring the sites for compliance with program regulations, preparing claims; and maintaining required documentation. If a nonprofit agency cannot take on the responsibility of sponsoring a Summer Food Program, it can always serve as

a feeding site for an existing sponsor. Many churches, for example, participate in the Summer Food Program as sites.

Progress in Texas

In 1993, the Texas Legislature passed a law mandating that school districts sponsor the Summer Food Program if 60 percent or more of their students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Since the law passed, the number of summer food sponsors in Texas has increased 60 percent. In 2008, 402, or approximately one-third of all Texas school districts, sponsored the Summer Food Program.

In 1999, the Legislature funded a Summer Food Outreach Program and provided a state supplement to federal meal reimbursement rates.⁴ In 2004, during Child Nutrition Program reauthorization, Congress made the Summer Food Program easier to administer.

With the support of the Legislature and the changes in federal law, Texas significantly expanded the reach of the Summer Food Program. The number of children who participate in the Summer Food Program has more than quadrupled over the last decade, growing from fewer than 100,000 in 1998 to more than 456,000 children fed in 2008. Over the same time, the number of meals served increased 78 percent to more than 17 million in 2008.

The Summer “Hunger Gap”

Despite this progress, fewer than one-in-five children (18 percent) who qualify for free or reduced price school meals participated in the Summer Food Program in 2008. See page three for participation rates by county.

Several factors contribute to this summer “hunger gap:”

- A shortage of summer food sites. There are only 48 summer food sites for every 100 school lunch programs in Texas.
- A lack of awareness of the program among potential sponsors and low-income families.
- Too many sites close their doors long before the end of summer. In Texas, participation drops precipitously in July and August after summer school ends.
- Too few sponsors in rural areas due to transportation barriers.
- Inadequate meal reimbursement rates.
- Complicated administrative requirements that can deter potential sponsors.

Overcoming the Barriers

USDA’s latest report on hunger and food insecurity found that 16.3 percent of Texas households struggled to afford food in 2008—the second highest rate of food insecurity in the nation. Nationally, the report documented the highest level of household food insecurity on record.⁵

Ignoring the hunger problem will have dire consequences for Texas. Poorly nourished children cannot learn, perform

worse in school, and are more likely to drop out. Adults without a high school degree are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed. This in turn makes Texas’ workforce less competitive and hurts our economy.

The Obama administration has committed itself to ending child hunger by 2015. The Summer Food Program offers an effective tool to reach this goal in Texas. Everyone in Texas, from the governor to the Legislature to the average citizen, must join forces to help the president and Congress—as well as our state and local leaders—take the actions necessary to expand the reach of the Summer Food Program. To that end, CPPP offers the following recommendations:

- **Local communities** must come together to identify potential Summer Food Program sponsors.
- **TDA** should redouble its efforts to recruit more sponsors and encourage sites to stay open longer.
- The **Legislature** should renew its commitment to the Summer Food Program by expanding the school district mandate to require more districts to sponsor the program.
- **Congress** should raise Summer Food reimbursement rates, expand eligibility, provide funding to help solve the transportation problems in rural areas, and reduce administrative barriers.

For *more information* about the Summer Food Program, go to www.squaremeals.org/.

To *become a sponsor or a site*, contact Joann Knox, TDA, at (512) 463-6331 or joann.knox@agr.state.tx.us.

¹ Both the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provide food assistance for children in low-income families during the summer months. In this paper, we refer to these programs as the “Summer Food Program.”

² Children in families with income below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL)—\$28,665/year for a family of four—qualify for free school meals. Children in families with income between 130 percent and 185 percent of FPL (\$40,793/year for a family of four) qualify for reduced-price school meals.

³ In higher-income areas, a sponsor may serve free meals to all children at an “enrolled site” if at least half of the children enrolled in an activity program at that site are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

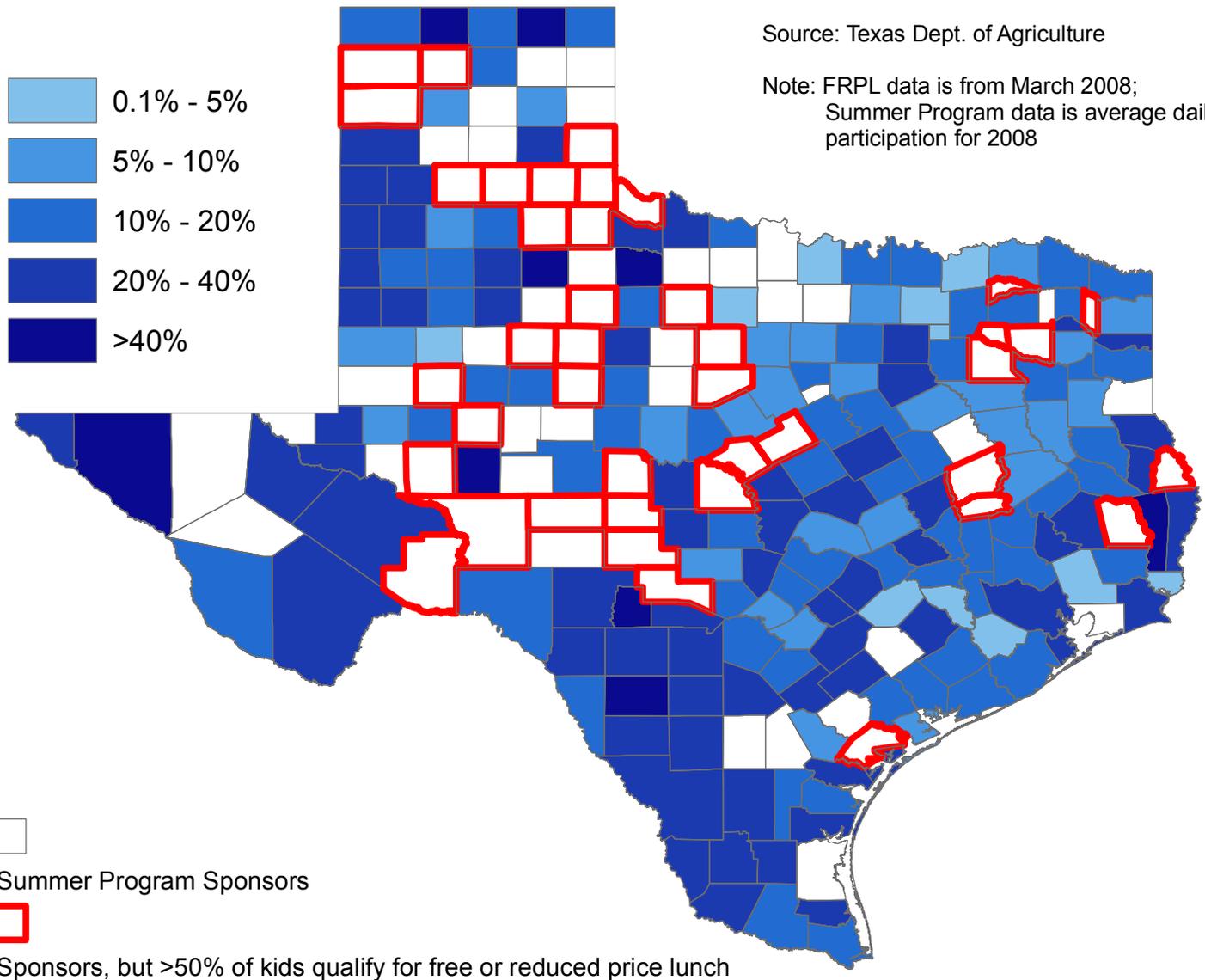
⁴ The state supplemental funding for the Summer Food Program was discontinued in 2005, but TDA continues to do outreach.

⁵ *Household Food Security in the United States*, Economic Research Service, USDA, November 2009. www.ers.usda.gov/features/householdfoodsecurity/

Ratio of Children Eating Summer Meals to Children Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch During School Year (Average Daily Participation)

Source: Texas Dept. of Agriculture

Note: FRPL data is from March 2008;
Summer Program data is average daily participation for 2008



Note: Open-enrollment summer food programs can only be operated in geographic areas where more than 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price (FRP) lunch. Therefore, any counties with less than 50 percent participation in FRP lunch are considered "NA".