



Co-Creating

Non-Congregate Summer Meals: Engaging Your Community to Design Your Program

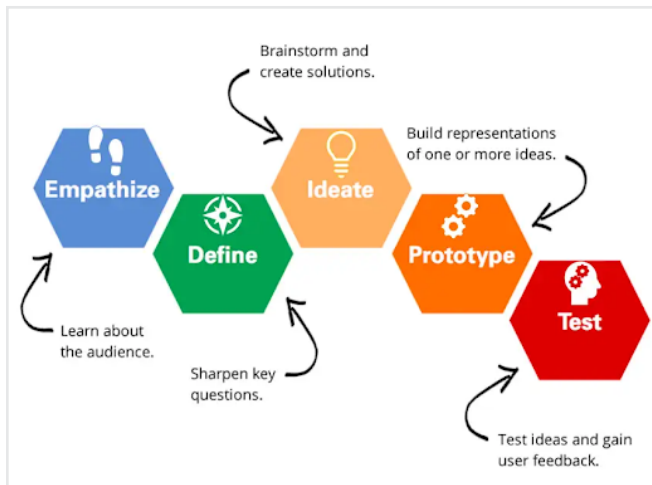
Background

In 2023, No Kid Hungry lauded the policy change allowing rural summer non-congregate meals. We knew that allowing meals to be served outside of congregate settings would create opportunities for an improved participant experience.

No Kid Hungry's Program Innovation team—a team dedicated to improving the user experience of federal nutrition programs and designing strategies that meet the needs of families facing economic insecurity—wanted to learn more about models and approaches that work best for families. With that goal in mind, the team partnered with Second Harvest of the Big Bend in Florida, equity design firm Studio Magic Hour, and community members in Gulf County and Taylor County to collaboratively design approaches to non-congregate summer meals that would meet the needs and desires of parents and caregivers, kids, and program operators.

Co-Creating with Community

Over the course of a year, we conducted a human-centered design process, a method for generating and testing concepts that prioritizes the needs and experiences of end users. The project began with interviews with program participants to understand their experiences and preferences with the summer meals program. Then, we facilitated two co-creation workshops with program participants and Second Harvest of the Big Bend staff to discuss learnings from interviews and generate ideas for the upcoming summer's non-congregate summer meals program. After interviews and co-creation workshops, we narrowed in on strategies that Second Harvest of the Big Bend could pilot in summer 2024. When deciding on concepts to test, we considered program participants' ideas alongside what was feasible for Second Harvest to take on given their own unique strengths and constraints. Ultimately, the concepts piloted are strategies that can be integrated into nearly any summer meals model or program.



Human-centered design process

Summer Meals Pilot

Parents and caregivers spoke positively of the program in interviews and co-creation workshops, noting that the meals would help them financially when kids are not in school and often eating more at home. They also had a lot of great ideas for ways the program could be more user-centered. Ultimately, the three concepts piloted were community-identified meal sites, activities for kids, and caregiver appreciation.

Community-Identified Meal Sites

In summer 2024, Second Harvest of the Big Bend planned to offer meals at distribution sites in two counties. In interviews, many program participants expressed that while their preferred model would be delivery, they would be willing to go to a site if it were quick, easy, and convenient. In order to ensure that sites worked for participants, we sought their input in co-creation workshops. As seen in the image below, we brought in service maps so that participants could identify sites that would work best for them. Participants generated ideas that the food bank had not previously considered. Some sites, like community parks, didn't work because it wasn't allowed by the county due to safety concerns while others, like volunteer fire departments, did work for the food bank. Determining feasibility of ideas generated in co-creation sessions is an important part of the design

process. Second Harvest of the Big Bend explored all the ideas for sites that participants generated and put into action those that were possible.

If you are interested in obtaining participant feedback on mobile meal and grab-and-go sites in your community, check out this resource, [Route to Reach!](#)



Community-identified sites on service maps

Activities for Kids

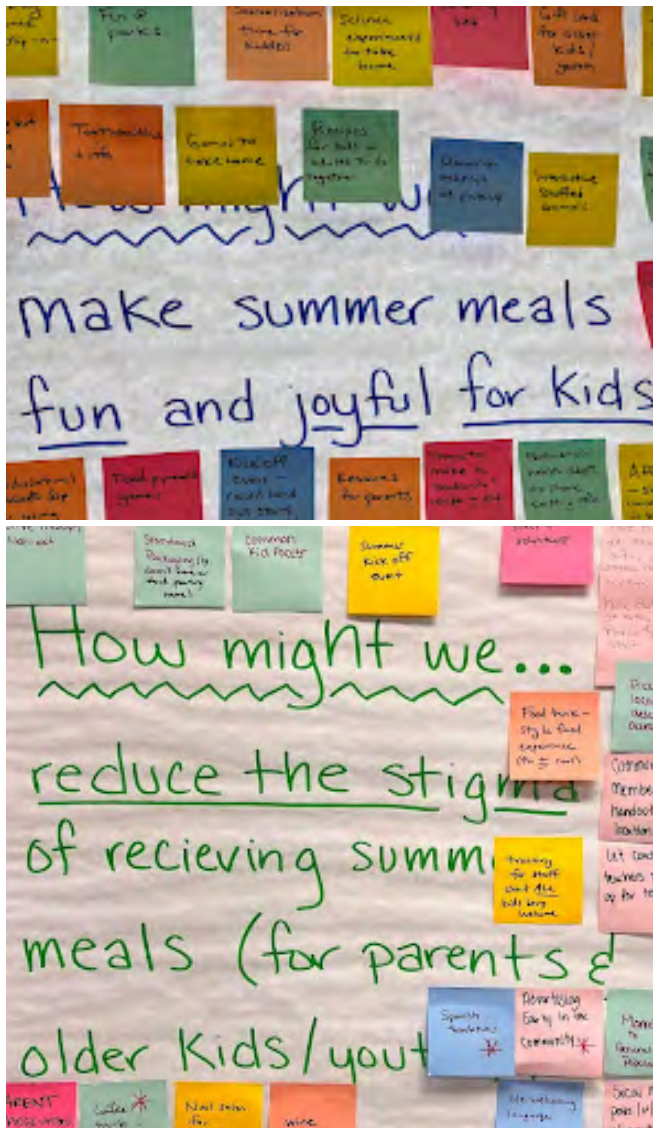
In interviews and co-creation sessions, program participants shared that there is not a lot to do for kids in the summer in their community. They brainstormed about how summer meals could be “more about the experience, not about the food.”



[Make it] more about the experience, not about the food.”

– PARENT

Participants imagined that providing activities for kids could decrease stigma and simultaneously create a joyful experience because families would feel like they are coming for a fun experience rather than food that might be difficult for them to afford.



Ideating with participants in co-creation workshops

Together in the co-creation workshop, we came up with ideas for activities that Second Harvest of the Big Bend could provide at summer meal sites. To help plan, we created a calendar for each week with a theme and corresponding goodies or activities. For instance, water week had water blasters; creative mind week had coloring books and crayons; and unplugged week had drawing tablets and fidget toys.

If you are interested in incorporating some joy into your summer meals program this summer, check out [Kids' Treasure Tracker](#), an idea bank filled with fun, educational, and wellness-focused activities, plus a sample weekly calendar and customizable template.

Caregiver Appreciation

Finally, participants generated the idea of showing appreciation to parents and caregivers. In the same way that activities for kids can help to reduce stigma and infuse joy into the program, participants hypothesized that activities and communication that make caregivers feel welcome and appreciated can too.



Those [notes of affirmation] were sweet, those were really sweet. We appreciated it because y'all are already doing a big thing for everybody who don't have the means....It makes us feel good to see little notes to know that we're still doing good for our kids."

– PARENT

Participants generated a lot of ideas for how to infuse caregiver appreciation into the summer meal program. Second Harvest of the Big Bend piloted a few over the summer - gift cards to caregivers at the end of the summer, as well as written words of affirmation that they distributed to caregivers with the meals.

There are a lot of possibilities for incorporating caregiver appreciation into your program. Consider the ways you are already communicating with parents and caregivers and think about how you might incorporate a message of appreciation! Check out this resource for more ideas and a fillable template: [Caregiver Appreciation Calendar](#).

Pilot Outcomes

Overall, the pilot was a success. By adding new, community-identified mobile meal sites to the programs in Gulf and Taylor County, participation rates grew from 8,634 meals served in summer 2023 to 22,421 meals served in summer 2024. The increase of 13,787 meals served in summer 2024 reflects a 160% increase in participation. Our partner at Second Harvest Food Bank shared, "We had high hopes and we went past it. The state actually asked if we submitted a typo!"

In post-pilot interviews with families, participants shared that their kids enjoyed the activities and in some cases they motivated kids reluctant to go to the site to attend. One parent said about the activities, “It really turned from them not wanting to go to, ‘What’s going to happen this week!’ and my child would remind me when the time came.” She elaborated, “It really made them feel special. It’s like, okay, they’re offering free lunches for school kids. And the older kids said they didn’t really want to go. I think they thought someone might see us. And then they realized they were good lunches and that they were going to get some cool 4th of July sunglasses. And then the activity book. Then the school supplies. They thought, ‘This is really cool!’ We’re a single family income, so it’s important.” Another parent similarly shared about the activities, “They were pretty thrilled about it. I know they were excited about it. That’s the first thing they go to.”

Participants also appreciated the notes of affirmation. One parent said, “Those [notes of affirmation] were sweet, those were really sweet. We appreciated it because y’all are already doing a big thing for everybody who don’t have the means....It makes us feel good to see the little notes to know that we’re still doing good for our kids.” Another parent found them to be so inspiring that she planned to pass them on, explaining, “Sometimes they’d come with little cards - the size of a business card - that said things like, ‘You matter’ and ‘You can do anything.’ They’re really uplifting. I saved them in a ziploc bag and I plan on redistributing them, like at the gas pump. It was cute and a little bit of a pick-me-up.” Not only did caregivers appreciate them, but kids liked them too. One parent said that her daughter rotated the notes on their refrigerator and said, “I have to keep these! I really like these!”



Designing Participant-Centered Summer Meal Programs in Your Community

The strategies co-created with community members in Gulf and Taylor Counties in Florida can be integrated into other summer meal programs, and we also know that every community is different and there are countless ways to design a participant-centered program. Conducting an entire human-centered design process is not going to be feasible for many meal providers who are already stretched thin. With that in mind, we created tools and resources meal providers can use to obtain and integrate participant feedback into their programs that are less time-intensive. Check them out below!

Snack-Sized Feedback – 10 creative and easy ways to obtain participant feedback during the summer

Voices Before Summer: Pre-Summer Caregiver Survey – A survey template meal providers can use to obtain participant feedback to help them design their program before it launches

Reflections After Summer: Post-Summer Caregiver Survey – A survey template meal providers can use to obtain participant feedback at the end of the summer meal program

Designing Participant-Centered Non-Congregate Summer Meal Programs – A webinar focused on designing summer non-congregate meal programs that center the needs and desires of program participants. We summarize findings from interviews and surveys with program participants, as well as insights from our collaboration with Second Harvest of the Big Bend in Florida where we co-designed program improvements with community members. Additionally, design strategist Lucy Flores shares practical tips and tools summer meal providers can use in their own communities to obtain participant feedback and incorporate it into their summer meal programs