

Addressing Food Insecurity for Families with Young Children with Healthy Meal Kits

Cabarrus Health Alliance in Cabarrus County, North Carolina

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An ongoing collection of feedback

from participants allowed the program to improve its response to participants' needs.

When working with community partners to offer fresh food to program participants, **awareness of partner capacity** to ensure healthy food gets into the hands of families who need it the most proved important.

Promising practices and policies to address food insecurity via child care programs

include distributing meals in ways that fit into families' schedules and increasing funding to provide meals in child care settings for low-income families.

Reducing decision fatigue and improving child nutrition. Working parents, especially single parents, experience decision fatigue at the end of the workday and can lack the cognitive energy for healthy meal preparation (<https://bit.ly/3VwnONk>). Instead, they may resort to convenient options, such as fast food. To reduce parents' decision fatigue, CHA partnered with daycare centers to increase access to healthy, fresh food for low-income parents with young children by offering precooked meals at a convenient location.

Pivoting to grab-and-go cooked meals to address parents' needs. Starting in 2021, CHA shifted from a meal ordering model on the app to grab-and-go pickups at daycare centers. After seeing low take-up, program staff realized that requiring parents to choose from a menu and order in advance did not fit the routines of targeted families, especially

Households with young children face higher rates of food insecurity and often face decision fatigue in finding and choosing healthy dinner options. In 2020, the Walmart Foundation awarded grants to 11 community-based projects offering innovative approaches to supporting healthy food access. The grants focused on initiatives that improve access to fresh foods for regions and populations experiencing disproportionately high rates of food insecurity. The Urban Institute was engaged by the Walmart Foundation to assess lessons learned across the 11 grant sites to inform future efforts to improve healthy food access in other communities. This fact sheet provides a brief summary of the Cabarrus Health Alliance's (CHA) initiative, which focused on reducing food insecurity among parents by providing healthy, kid-friendly dinners during child care pickup.

IMPROVING WORKING FAMILIES' NUTRITION WITH HEALTHY, BALANCED MEALS DURING CHILD CARE

CHA, a public health authority in Cabarrus County, North Carolina, partnered with Meals on Wheels, the University of North Carolina Charlotte (UNCC), and three child care organizations in the county to reduce food insecurity among working parents. They did so by providing "Go-Go" bags, which are premade healthy dinners, during child care pickup to decrease parents' stress and decision fatigue and improve families' nutrition.

At the start of the program in late 2019, parents ordered meals, made payments, and left feedback on a mobile app. Later, in 2021 and 2022, the program shifted to grab-and-go pickups of cooked meals in lieu of customized ordering based on

parental feedback and community input.

those with fluctuating schedules. Rather, providing a healthy meal directly at pickup was more convenient. This remained in alignment with the original goal of the program—to mitigate decision fatigue by having dinner ready at daycare pickup.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK SHAPED PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

It is not uncommon for program staff to create programs aimed at increasing healthy food access without the input of its intended beneficiaries. Even when the programs are designed with evidence-backed research, they can inadvertently exclude certain people and can be improved to best serve the population of interest. Programs could include mechanisms that allow community members to offer their feedback to improve a program, which is what CHA did.

Collection of robust formative participant data and ongoing program monitoring. CHA conducted over 40 preprogram implementation interviews with parents to gauge interest and meal acquisition behaviors to inform program structure and meal variety. They also incorporated internal taste-testing with staff members and participant taste-testing with to-go cups of food sent home with parents. The taste-testing and subsequent feedback allowed CHA to improve the healthy meals they offered families, which increased healthy food uptake for families.

Understanding the capacity of community partners. The program's success relied on the capacity of selected daycare center liaisons between CHA and parents. In centers where liaisons had capacity, the program was successful. In other centers, daycare personnel lacked capacity during given the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the Omicron variant surge in January 2022. In the long term, the team identified that clearer expectations of engagement with centers would help ensure the success of the program. Other ways of capacity building could include offering a stipend at child care centers to assist with participation given the high rates of turnover, lack of fair compensation, and long working hours across many child care centers in the US (<https://bit.ly/3Vvm2w0>).

Opportunities for decreasing barriers to participation. Because of limited funds at the child care centers CHA partnered with, the program offered precooked meals for a fee, which succeeded for higher-income parents but posed a barrier for lower-income parents, such as those with children attending a Head Start center. Although federal funds exist to provide children with free meals during the summer and after-school hours through programs like the Summer Food Service Program, less attention and fewer resources are given to subsidize prepared meals for families through child care partners. Increased funding for such efforts could subsidize meal costs for low-income families and render initiatives like CHA's more accessible and affordable for families most impacted by food insecurity and time poverty.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The program's meal kit structure provides an innovative model for addressing food insecurity. Partnering with daycare centers was effective to reach busy parents. Partnering with the child care sector is an evidence-based method to reduce food insecurity and support younger children's nutrition (<https://bit.ly/3LwDP17>). Promising practices and policies include distributing meals in ways that fit into families' schedules to reduce barriers to healthy foods and increasing funding to provide meals in child care settings for families with low incomes.

ADDITIONAL READING

FROM SAFETY NET TO SOLID GROUND

Four Policies That Matter for Scaling Healthy Food Access Interventions

Elaine Waxman and Cassandra Martinchek