

County Leaders Can Keep Youth Healthy and Engaging in Summer

Summer is around the corner. For many low-income youth, this means discontinued access to learning opportunities and the nutrition provided by school lunch programs. This can allow the most vulnerable youth to slip through the cracks.

- Low-income students are more likely to experience summer learning loss, losing two-to-three months in grade level reading skills while their more affluent peers make gains.
- In some communities, inadequate access to summer programs for at-risk youth may create an environment conducive to gang involvement other harmful activities.
- Limited access to healthy food and safe places to play increases children's risk of food insecurity, childhood obesity and chronic disease such as diabetes. A recent [UCLA study](#) found that 1 in 3 young adults have pre-diabetes. Diabetes-related costs exceed \$24 billion annually in California.
- Additional food costs can exacerbate financial hardship on families, sometimes forcing difficult choices between rent, utilities, medicine and food.

USDA summer meal programs aim to prevent this summer nutrition gap yet in California, only 20% of eligible kids utilize these programs, often due to a lack of awareness or activities. As a result, California counties leave on the table nearly \$40 million each year in federal reimbursements.

County leaders across the state are stepping up to be the connectors of county, city, school, and community agencies. Below are five ways county leaders can keep youth healthy and engaged in summer:

1. Host a convening of key partners to better understand the summer landscape and identify opportunities. Because responsibility for summer does not land squarely on the shoulders of any one agency, a lack of shared understanding can lead to the assumption that someone else has it covered. Convening county, school, city, law enforcement, anti-hunger and other key community leaders can ensure all systems are connected when school is out. A discussion focused on the factors impacting participation can generate opportunities for practical collaboration. For example, San Bernardino County Health Department has played a connecting role and helped to create a more coordinated effort throughout the county, increase sites and community awareness, promoting nutrition and connecting families to other resources through summer meal sites in conjunction with its [County Nutrition Action Plan](#) goals.

2. Promote summer meal sites in your county. Use county communication channels to provide a “one stop shop” for families to find summer meal sites throughout the county. Making the information available throughout county agencies—particularly those that serve low-income families who can serve as “trusted messengers”—can help ensure families know about this resource.

3. Start or expand summer lunch programs in county libraries. More than 60 county library branches across 15 counties will serve summer meals this summer. A [Lunch at the Library](#) program can jumpstart partnerships between county agencies, and with cities and schools. Last summer, Kern County Superintendent of Schools provided lunches for as many as 200 children each day alongside the library’s literacy and enrichment programs, technology access and complementary activities provided by other agencies like California Highway Patrol and Kern County Department of Public Health. These partnerships leverage libraries’ credibility as a trusted community hub and breadth of services to create a practical model for collaboration. The [National League of Cities CHAMPs grants](#) available to city partners can help support these collaborations.

4. Encourage county agencies to play a supporting role. Summer meal programs provide county agencies with an opportunity to support internal agency goals. County Office of Education youth employment programs, for example, can provide youth with workforce readiness skills and meaningful employment opportunities by hiring them to help manage summer meal sites. Many county departments have a natural connection: Contra Costa County Public Health has been working in partnership with all of the school districts to provide nutrition education at summer meal sites while the Office of the District Attorney and county probation department engage with families and promote anti-truancy efforts. A partnership between Riverside County Library and Riverside USD also provided an opportunity for the local health department to educate parents about how to better manage their children’s asthma.

5. Identify opportunities to better serve unincorporated areas and address summer transportation challenges. For many youth, access to summer activities is limited because of transportation challenges. Tulare County addressed this need by providing free transportation service for at-risk youth to activities throughout the county through the [Tulare County Loop bus](#).

How to learn more:

- Find summer meal sites in your county on the [California Department of Education’s website](#) or with [USDA’s Capacity Builder Tool](#).
- Learn more about summer meals and how to get involved at www.ca-ilg.org/summermealcoalition or www.lunchatthelibrary.org.