

Written Testimony Submitted for the Record
“Examining the Summer Food Service Program”

to the

*House Committee on Education and the Workforce:
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and
Secondary Education*

Given by

*Denise Ogilvie,
Vice President of Outreach and Grants Management,
Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas*

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Chairman Rokita and Ranking Member Polis,

At the outset, allow me to thank you and the members of this committee for inviting me today to speak about the Summer Food Service Program. It is truly a privilege to be here today to address a program which is so critical to assisting families and children in need.

Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas is a multi-service faith-based organization serving 21 counties in Northeast Kansas. Of these 21 counties, three are predominantly urban while the rest are rural with low population densities and towns more than 20 minutes apart. Despite the diversity in communities served, our agency believes in responding to all needs and trying to fill in gaps where services might be missing.

While the other panelists can speak to some of the ongoing studies and impacts of the program on a national level, I hope today to provide some insights on my agency’s experience as a new Summer Meals Program participant and illuminate some of the unique challenges we encounter working in a setting that caters to both urban and rural communities.

The Summer Meals Program plays a critical role not only in Kansas but across the country in closing the meal gap. In Kansas, we are national and global leaders in producing wheat, sorghum and beef, yet often the very communities that are the bread-basket for the world are the same communities that have challenges in affording bread for their own families. Like most places across the country, we continue to see an improving economy with low unemployment. Despite this, poverty rates in

rural communities continue to be higher than those in urban or suburban communities, and more than 14% of households still face food insecurity in Kansas. Compounding this reality are the relative lack of programs targeted to rural communities and the difficulty in providing programs like the summer meals program to communities with a widely dispersed or small population.

And while I speak of my experience in Kansas today, I recognize when speaking with my colleagues across the Catholic Charities network that the challenges we see in Kansas are not unique but can be seen in communities across the country.

Responding to the Need

In the spring of 2015 Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas was approached by our local food bank to consider helping to expand their summer food program. While this was not a program my agency had a great deal of experience working with, we did our research and community assessment and realized there was a real need and opportunity to serve those in need.

Through our research we discovered that Kansas was ranked 49th in feeding kids during the summer months. It showed that while nearly half of all children in Kansas qualified for free or reduced lunches only 7% were participating in the summer meals program. That meant that families that relied on school lunch to provide a nutritious balanced meal for their children were working harder to make ends meet, going to local food banks to ask for assistance or their children had become food insecure.

In response to this need, we opened our first summer meals program in 2015. That first year we operated eight sites and served more than 3,000 meals. In 2016 we went beyond operating sites to actually sponsoring a site. One of the main reasons we moved to sponsorship was that we recognized our local food bank did not cover all the 21 counties we served and these communities were asking us to bring summer food to them.

By 2017 our effort had grown to 32 sites serving approximately 800 children with over 15,000 meals. At the same time Kansas moved from 49th to 45th in summer meals program participation.

Every one of our sites is operated by volunteers, and Catholic Charities staff conducts staff education, manage all paperwork, food ordering and delivery, conduct all site reviews, and provide materials for activities. Our agency doesn't do any food preparation. We provide shelf-stable or thaw-and-serve options to all of our sites. We are aware that while the nutritional value of a shelf-stable meal meets guidelines, it is not always appealing to everyone. Therefore, if at any time a school district, or other organization, wants to open a site that provides hot lunches we are happy to bow out of that community.

While the Summer Meal Program has shown great value in our work and our community, I do want to discuss a few things we observe in our work and areas where the program can be strengthened.

Building Partnerships

One of the keys to a successful program is building successful partnerships within communities. Successful partnerships for us have been forged with libraries, community centers, local churches, health departments, low-income housing projects and even schools. For example, in Holton, KS, a town of just over 3,000 people, the school ran a summer school program but was unable to afford

the staffing and kitchen costs of providing meals to students. Since 50 percent of the children at the time residing in the community were eligible for free or reduced-price meals, under the program we were able to work with the school board to establish and open a summer meals program to provide lunches to the children attending summer school as well as other children in the community. When summer school ends each year, we move to the community center in Holton to serve lunch.

Building public-private partnerships like this not only allows us to serve more children but also allows Catholic Charities to utilize our charitable efforts to supplement the program. This partnership is particularly important in rural communities where the number of children served at one site is smaller and the distance to travel between sites is greater. Thankfully, with the generous support of donors, we have been able to cover these costs and continue to serve these communities.

These are just a few examples of how public and community partnerships are critical for successful summer meals programs. I would encourage you to continue to foster these partnerships. Alone the costs and challenges of implementation can be too daunting, but together we can build a more community responsive program to feed children in need.

Supporting Outreach

One of the challenges in smaller communities to reaching more children is the administrative hurdles to starting up or running a Summer Meals Program. As a fairly new participant in this kind of program, we have seen how these requirements can feel overwhelming for some communities and non-profits who want to start a program. In our experience, one of the best tools in overcoming this obstacle is encouraging outreach programs by regional USDA offices and State Departments of Education.

As a sponsor, we have received incredibly helpful assistance from the Kansas State Department of Education. They were supportive in the initial stage of filling out applications and getting sites approved; offered several meetings to educate staff and volunteers; and provided assistance with understanding paperwork requirements and improving our programs. The flexibility of the program and Kansas State Department of Education's willingness to work with us has been of great help.

One example of this was an experience we had last year when the Kansas City Public Schools reached out to our agency for help providing meals. The school system is a site sponsor but had challenges in providing meals during the late summer months when they needed to shut down in order to prepare for the school year. They contacted us to see if we could pick up some of the sites until school started. Working with the Kansas State Department of Education, we were able to set up a site quickly and build relationships with other communities looking for a summer meals sponsor. Through this collaboration we have been able to not only serve more summer meals but also expand Child and Adult Care Food Programs (CACFP) to other communities.

Given this experience, I would ask you to continue to encourage state and governmental outreach so that gaps can be closed and barriers to program participation can be minimized.

Improving program flexibility

Another challenge in serving rural communities is the program's congregate feeding requirements. Under the current program, children participating in the summer meals program must travel to sites

at set times and eat their meals on the premises. In rural communities these requirements can become an insurmountable challenge to children. In the case of extreme weather, it can be dangerous.

On two separate occasions last summer, we faced extreme weather warnings at our sites and had limited ability to notify staff and children about the dangers.

In addition, the lack of transportation and ability to get food to children in need because of the congregate care requirement in rural areas means our agency often must purchase meals and deliver them to children unable to get to the meal sites. For example we had an instance in Westmoreland, a small community where they do not have a grocery store and the closest store is 25 minutes away, where a volunteer contacted us about a family on a farm in need. The parents were working and the site was not within walking distance for the family's three children. To help the family, we purchased and delivered the meals ourselves. However, this is just one of many examples where greater flexibility to the congregate feeding requirement would help outreach to rural communities.

Finally, another challenge we see in the congregate feeding requirement in rural areas is providing support to parents. In rural communities where having a car is often a necessity to reach meal sites, parents often drive their children but then must sit and watch as their children eat. This can at times lead to a drop off in attendance as children know their parents are also hungry but do not want to eat in front of them. In order to address this challenge, our agency purchases and prepares separate non-summer meal lunches for the parents. While this is yet another expense, it is one we feel contributes to a successful program and encourages greater family support.

We would therefore urge you to examine ways to provide greater flexibility to the congregate feeding requirement so that successful sites can be supported. In addition, this would provide options for families in communities where weather, distance or family circumstance are a barrier to participation.

Conclusion

The goal of the Summer Food Service Program is to provide meals to children in needy areas when school is not in session. At Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas our goal is to put love into action by dispensing love and hope to our neighbors in need throughout our community. Together, we can help the mother of four in Overland Park to feed her children and manage her budget; we can stand with with the librarian in Harford creating a safe haven for children; and we can share in the joy of the parents sitting and laughing with their children in Frankfort.

I thank you again for your time and attention. More importantly, I thank you for supporting and working together to strengthen such a critical program.