

Breaking Barriers: How Kentucky is Pioneering Rural Non-Congregate Meals Through Collaboration and Innovation

2025

9,108,532
Non-Congregate Summer Meals

1,868,374
Congregate Summer Meals

SUMMER MEALS HAS CONTINUED TO GROW

The number of meals served in Kentucky grew significantly in 2024, increasing from a little over 5 million meals in 2023 to just over 8 million meals in one summer. In 2025, the state sustained that momentum and even added to it with nearly 11 million meals served.

REACHING MORE KIDS IN RURAL AREAS

Non-congregate meals are helping programs reach more children in rural areas throughout the state.

No Kid Hungry estimates that non-congregate summer meals reached 55% more children in rural areas in 2024 than 2023.



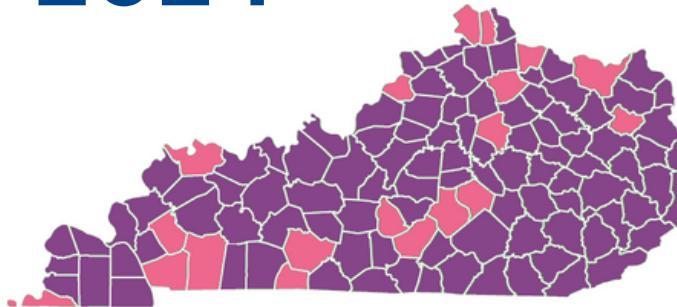
MORE INVESTMENT FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

This increase in the number of summer meals served doesn't just feed more children; it is also an investment in the schools and community organizations serving the meals. More federal reimbursement means that sponsors can invest and continue to improve the quality of their programs and the meals they provide to Kentucky children while school is out for the summer.

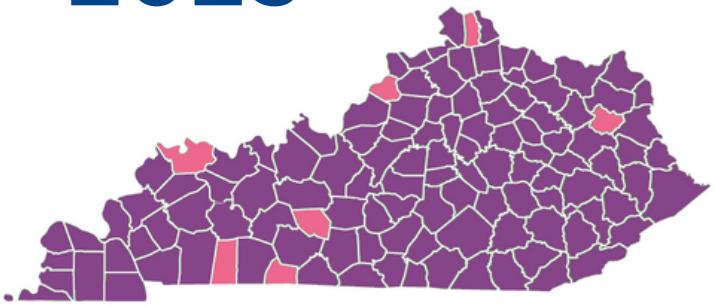


SUMMER MEAL GROWTH IN KENTUCKY

2024



2025



Counties highlighted in pink in the maps above indicate those without access to non-congregate meals.

Photos courtesy of Feeding Kentucky

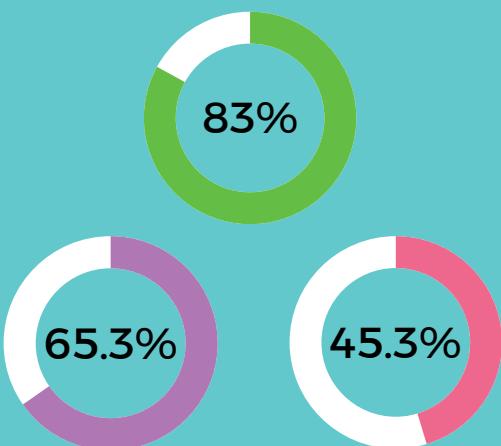
Non-Congregate Summer Meals Availability by County (120 total counties)

- 116 counties offered summer meals in 2024, and all 120 counties offered summer meals in 2025 for the first time ever.
- 99 offered non-congregate summer meals in 2024, and 113 counties offered non-congregate summer meals in 2025.
- Long-standing gaps in local access to summer meals in Caldwell and Green counties were closed by local food bank and school district sponsors.

SPONSORS EMBRACE NON-CONGREGATE MEALS

In 2025,

- 83% of meals served were non-congregate meals
- 65.3% of sponsors served non-congregate meals
- 45.3% of summer meal sites served non-congregate meals



How did Kentucky make this expansion possible?

State Culture of Innovation and Accessibility

The Kentucky Department of Education's (KDE) Summer Food Service Program team has cultivated a culture that fosters innovation and program accessibility for sponsors. In the inaugural summer of non-congregate summer meals (2023), the team offered weekly office hours to support new and existing sponsors taking on this new opportunity. They used site visits to build relationships with sponsors and offer technical assistance instead of monitors and penalties. This open-door approach emphasized the team's commitment to being a reliable resource, creating an environment where sponsors felt comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance.

Kentucky has a strong history of addressing the needs of its sponsors and rural communities. The existing network of strong relationships throughout the state only aided in the expansion of rural non-congregate statewide. As early as 2019, the Kentucky Department of Education supported granting initiatives to expand mobile meal programs, acknowledging the limitations of traditional congregate models in a state characterized by geographic and transportation challenges. Kentucky's history of mobile meals demonstrates its adaptability to meet the needs of rural communities and that's only continued with the newer non-congregate provisions.

Additionally, KDE has often thought of new and creative ways to try to lessen the burden on their sponsors when possible. Many years ago, they identified the opportunity for a county-wide eligibility (CWE). This broad area eligibility both alleviates the burden on sponsors to have to individually qualify their sites in those counties with CWE and helps streamline the application process. In the summer of 2025, 111 of the 120 counties had CWE.



Strong Partnerships

Partnerships play a pivotal role in all summer meal programs, but Kentucky's expansion success came down to expanding not only the meal programs operated but also the types of organizations operating as meal sites. KDE knew that strong sponsors, like school districts, could work together with new meal sites like libraries and other community organizations. Libraries are also integral, with 53 libraries serving as sites and one as a summer meal sponsor.

A unique part of the Kentucky school system is the Family Resource and Youth Services Centers (FRYSCs) which act as vital liaisons between schools and families. They help identify those who might struggle to access sites and promote programs ahead of the summer. This constant communication with families is key to increasing summer meal participation.

School districts themselves account for 84% of summer meal sponsors in Kentucky, showcasing their expertise in feeding children during the school year and the summer months. Russell County is a prime example of this expertise transitioning from school year to summer feeding, going from no summer meals service to providing 128,903 non-congregate meals in their first year.

Community Stories

Dive into stories from communities across Kentucky on how they used strong partnerships and a culture of innovation and accessibility to grow their summer non-congregate programming to meet the occasion. [Read more through our story map.](#)

