



The Struggle with Expanding the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in Oklahoma

The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma has been the largest sponsor of SFSP summer feeding programs in Oklahoma for the last three years. Since 2009, we have been working to provide meals for students who live in high need areas of the state. In the summer of 2019, we partnered with 121 sites in 28 counties across central and western Oklahoma. The SFSP program provides us with the best opportunity to serve these children.

As we have expanded out of the Oklahoma City metro area, we have identified three major roadblocks to greater expansion. These roadblocks combined with current rules set by the current Childhood Nutrition Reauthorization package, make it difficult to expand our services to children who are in need of meals during the summer.

Roadblock 1: Transportation

The SFSP program requires children to eat their meals in a congregate setting. This creates a barrier for children, who must travel to sites on a daily basis to receive their meals. Even in a metropolitan setting, this is difficult. Public transportation is incomplete at best and does not always extend to the most impoverished areas. Further, bus stops may not be near SFSP locations necessitating a lengthy walk to and from a site. And even if there is close proximity, parents may not feel safe letting small children walk to and from a site.

This issue is further complicated in areas outside the metropolitan centers of Oklahoma. Many counties may have only one SFSP site serving the entire area, which means in some cases a child may have to travel an hour or more one way to access a meal. For many families, the inability to provide nutrition for their children is further exacerbated by the cost of fuel, meaning they may have to choose between driving their child to get a “free” meal and then not be able to buy groceries for the family due to the cost of paying for fuel to drive to that “free” meal.

Roadblock 2: Resources

As we have already mentioned, SFSP meals must be served in a congregate setting. That means any location that wants to serve a meal must be able to provide at least one staff member who is trained in running the program, a storage location for meals and milk that maintains the appropriate temperature of the food, and a shelter, in case of inclement weather. Any one of these requirements can prove daunting for a community who is seeking to start an SFSP site. Many of our rural areas are already struggling to provide basic services to their communities. An additional project, such as the SFSP program, can present a daunting challenge.

Roadblock 3: Timing

One item that is often overlooked in the discussion of Oklahoma's ranking in summer feeding is the timing of when the United States Department of Agriculture completes their yearly assessment. The counts that are evaluated are service numbers in July and August. Oklahoma schools, which serve a large number of SFSP meals during summer school, are not conducting summer school in July or August. Our schools conduct summer school in June, and host summer meals during summer school in June.

As a provider who has worked to expand summer meal access in July and August, I can tell you that participation drops in those months, even at non-school sites. Excessive heat, the Fourth of July holiday, and family trips, not to mention site fatigue, play a huge role in this drop off in service numbers.

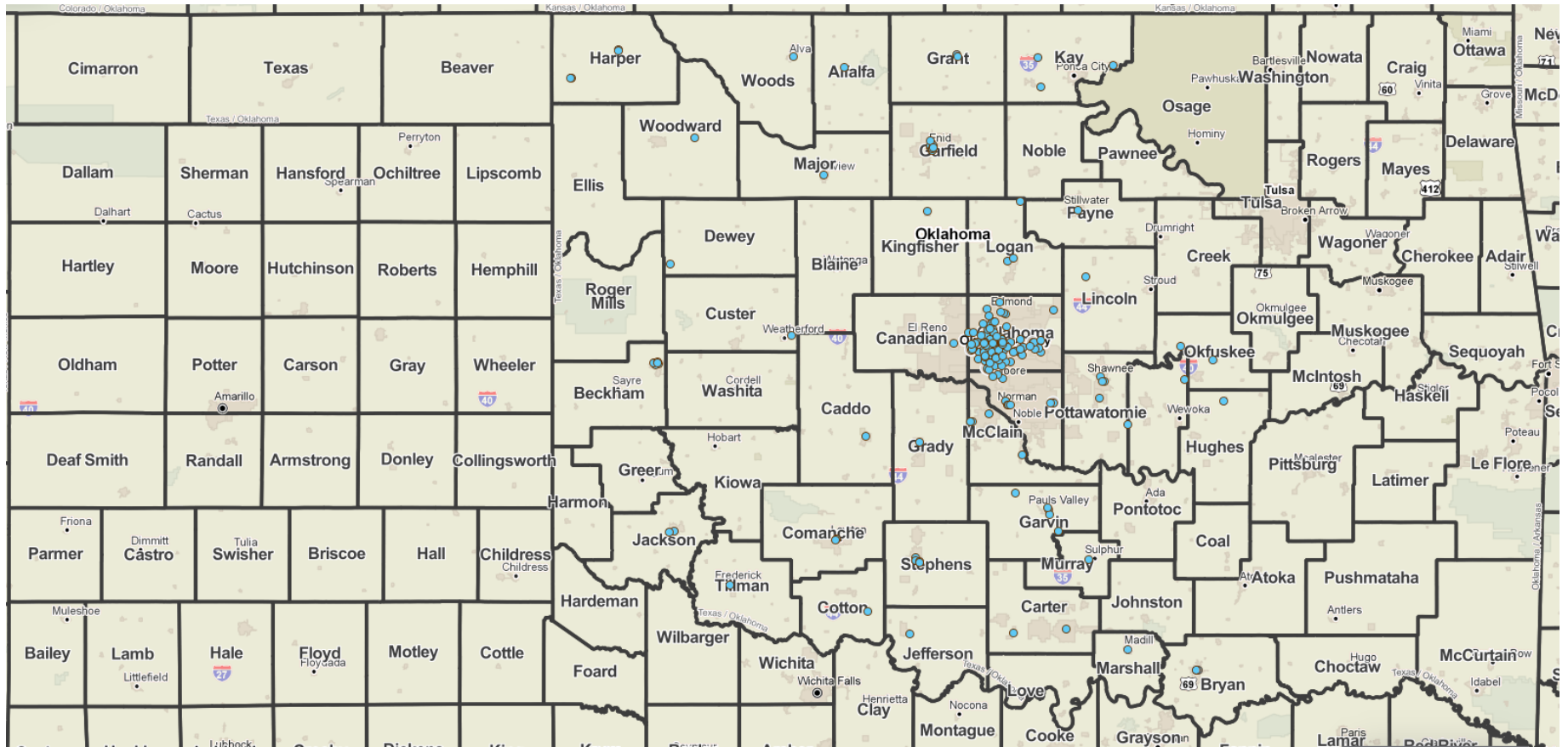
Additional Barriers:

In addition to these barriers, the program itself is difficult to administer. Sites must be monitored on a regular basis. Daily paperwork must be collected and must be completed in meticulous fashion and sites must have the technological ability to submit the paperwork to a sponsor on a daily basis.

In summary, barriers for the expansion of the summer feeding programs exist at both the state and federal levels. This program is needed and crucial to taking care of our most vulnerable citizens- food insecure children. Any assistance the state can provide to address transportation, access to resources, and the ability to strengthen site participation in July and August would go a long way towards moving us out of last place in SFSP access.



2019 Summer Feeding Locations





2019 Oklahoma City Metro Summer Feeding Locations

