The Nebraska Child and Adult Care Food Program Pilot

Nutrition for rural children in child care

Quality child care options for low income families

Stable and professional businesses for rural child care providers
The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) plays a vital role in increasing the nutrition of low income children and supporting low income families. This important program reimburses child care providers for serving nutritious meals to the children they look after. Research has shown that CACFP is key to assuring that family child care homes provide healthy meals and snacks. Not only does this program ensure nutritious meals for children, it also enables child care providers to sustain their businesses and provide affordable care to low income families. CACFP has grown from serving 23,200 children in 1969 to serving 3,047,000 children in 2006.

Several years back, local sponsors noticed that this important program was not reaching rural regions in their states. They found that the distribution of poverty made meeting CACFP eligibility requirements more difficult in rural than in urban areas. But, there is a real need for CACFP among rural working communities. Research has shown that longer distances between home, child care, and job sites mean that rural parents often travel farther to jobs, causing longer hours and more meals for their children in child care. Consequently, child care plays an especially important role in ensuring proper nutrition for young children in rural areas. Research has also shown that rural communities face higher child obesity rates than do urban areas. CACFP nutrition education and reimbursements can play an important role in combating this trend by promoting healthier eating habits in family child care homes.

To facilitate greater CACFP participation in rural areas, Nebraska was awarded a pilot program in the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act that expanded CACFP eligibility. Under standard regulations, if a family child care home provider is located in an area where 50 percent or more of the children are eligible
for free or reduced-price school meals, then the provider is eligible to receive CACFP low-income reimbursement rates. Many more homes are willing to participate in CACFP through this relatively easy route of area eligibility. However, the distribution of poverty in rural communities makes meeting the standard eligibility requirements more difficult than in urban areas, which tend to have areas of highly concentrated poverty.

The pilot program has made meeting CACFP eligibility requirements easier in rural communities by decreasing the area eligibility threshold from 50 to 40 percent, and has resulted in 90 new qualifying rural areas.

Although the pilot is still in its early stages, there are preliminary signs that it has been a success:

rural children are accessing better nutrition and low income families are able to find providers who do quality, professional care.
Honey became a licensed provider in July of 2006 in order to take advantage of the food program. She had begun child care just a year earlier so that she could stay at home with her four month old daughter and still have an income.

These days, Honey looks after five to seven children, serving them breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack.

CACFP has dramatically changed the types of menus she serves. A snack used to consist of cookies, now it is peanut butter toast, a banana, and milk or juice. A lunch used to be a cheap box of mac and cheese and fruit, and now it is chicken, potatoes, peaches, and bread. The CACFP reimbursements have made paying for these types of foods possible.

Honey’s parents really appreciate the food program. They can’t believe what the kids will eat now that they are being exposed to healthy foods at child care. Honey’s philosophy is that if she puts the healthy foods in front of her kids enough times, they’ll eventually eat them. “The first five times I put string beans in front of my daughter, she wouldn’t eat them. Now she asks for them,” says Honey. Her son, on the other hand, who went to a provider who wasn’t on the program, is not a very good eater and won’t touch certain vegetables. Honey wishes that her son’s provider had been on CACFP, so that he would have developed the same healthy eating habits that the kids she looks after are getting.

She firmly believes that the CACFP guidelines improve nutrition. Like she says, “Now (with the food program), I’m held accountable for what I feed the kids.”
Case Study: Out with the Cookies

The days of oreos are long gone at Kelly Davis’ house. Now she buys bananas, and they’re gone within a day.

No, Kelly has not begun Weight Watchers. Rather, she has begun the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and is serving the kids she looks after healthy foods, all day, everyday.

Kelly began using CACFP in October of 2005 and it has had an enormous positive impact on the foods she serves to the five children she cares for. Where lunch used to be a trip to McDonald’s or a frozen pizza, it is now a homemade soup with meat and vegetables or chicken and rice. Where a snack used to be a bowl of ice cream, it is now apples, peanut butter, and milk.

The reimbursements have helped a lot – her cupboards, fridge, and freezer are always full. This has enabled her to serve more complete meals, with meats, sides, and veggies.

CACFP is one of the main reasons one of her parents started bringing her kids to Kelly. The parent saw that her kids just wanted junk food at night, and she wanted them to develop healthier eating habits. CACFP provided this parent with reassurance that her kids would get nutritious foods at child care, and she likes the changes she has seen.

So does Kelly. With CACFP, they’re doing meats and fruit salads at the Davis household – the days of fast food are over.
Case Study: Healthy Habits, Better Nutrition

This spring, Melissa Johnson is going to try something new with the children she looks after. She is going to have them help her water and tend a fruit and vegetable garden, so they can be active participants in developing healthy eating habits.

Growing the garden is just part of a dramatic transformation that has taken place in Melissa’s child care business. Just a year ago, corndogs and fruit loops were Melissa’s typical daycare foods. These days, not only does Melissa refuse to buy junk food, she even watches out for preservatives.

The cause of all these changes? The Child and Adult Care Food Program.

Melissa started on CACFP in September of 2006 after she became a state approved provider. CACFP has dramatically improved the meals Melissa serves to the four children she looks after. “It used to be that it was nothing for me to throw a bowl of Trix cereal or a hot dog in front of my kids,” she says. “I also used to be very guilty on serving Kool-Aide.” But now a typical lunch menu includes a roast, sweet potatoes, corn, and bread, as well as milk or juice. Meals also involve Melissa and the kids discussing healthy foods and building good eating habits. Melissa is grateful for how much more aware CACFP education and training has made her about health and nutrition.

She also appreciates the additional resources that come with being a CACFP participant. She has gained access to a library, and has checked out books and videos on topics ranging from children’s behavior to book-keeping. The book-keeping information particularly has helped Melissa to simplify her records and keep better track of her daycare income and expenses.

In sum, CACFP has transformed Melissa’s daycare, providing her with the education and support she needs to run a more quality child care business.

“It used to be that it was nothing for me to throw a bowl of Trix cereal or a hot dog in front of my kids. I also used to be very guilty on serving Kool-Aide” - Melissa Johnson, describing her meals prior to CACFP.
Quality Care for Low Income Families...

Case Study: Feeding Children, Supporting Families

Back in the summer of 2006, Sherry Huddleston received a call from the local day care provider in town. The provider was going to close her child care business, and was recommending her families to Sherry. Sherry had been taking care of kids since the birth of her twins five years ago, but to take these families on, she was going to need to get state approved. The new families were receiving child care subsidies, and they couldn’t afford to pay Sherry unless she became state approved and could accept state payments. Sherry was sympathetic – child care was so limited in Falls City, a small town in the southeast corner of the state, that she had been unable to find care for her boys several years earlier, and had begun home care for that reason.

So, Sherry began the state approval process, and got onto the food program shortly after. She currently looks after three children as well as her own, and most days serves breakfast, lunch, and two snacks. Her efforts have enabled these Falls City families to access quality child care instead of having to leave their kids with neighbors or by themselves.

The CACFP program has definitely improved her child care. Prior to CACFP, a typical lunch menu would consist of hot dogs and a drink. With CACFP, a typical lunch menu includes chicken strips, potatoes, salad, fruit cocktail, and milk. “With this program, I feel like they teach you a lot,” Sherry says. “They’re willing to help. If you’re lacking in something, they help you figure out how to (change your menus).”

Families are able to access quality care instead of leaving their kids with neighbors or by themselves.

The training CACFP requires has been very educational. Sherry says that the booklets and tests have helped her understand what foods kids of different ages require, and how different foods are beneficial. The program has also educated her about different incentives she is eligible for, such as a bonus for CPR certification.

Finally, the CACFP reimbursements have helped Sherry offset some of her transportation and grocery costs. Wage-wise, she doesn’t make a lot, and she has to travel to High Wausa, Kansas for her groceries. The reimbursements have enabled her to meet the CACFP nutrition guidelines and to continue to provide quality care to low income families in Falls City.
Becky Sherman began participating in CACFP one year into the pilot program, in June of 2006. She was expecting her second child and wanted to stay at home with her, and doing home child care seemed like a natural transition from her job doing adult care.

These days, Becky looks after six children, several from low income families receiving state child care subsidies. Some of her kids arrive at her home as early as 4am and often stay until after supper. Becky’s flexibility with hours meets an important need in Nebraska City, where child care providers who can keep the children past “normal business hours” are in high demand for parents working long days. Becky’s child care has reached capacity, but she is still getting calls from inquiring parents.

“If I didn’t get reimbursed, chances are I wouldn’t do it” - Becky Sherman, explaining how CACFP supports her child care business

Now that Becky has CACFP, she can serve a full complement of meals and snacks. A typical snack might consist of milk, bananas, or graham crackers and a supper might consist of meat, noodles, veggies, fruit, and milk. This has been a big change from the food she used to provide when caring for her nieces and nephews, when frozen pizza or mac and cheese was the order of the day.

Becky says that the CACFP nutrition education and training have helped her to make sure the kids are eating everything they should from all the food groups – meats, grains, dairy, fruits, and veggies. The reimbursements have also helped with the cost of food - Becky approximates that she spends $500-$600 per month on groceries.
CACFP is important to the parents as well as the provider. Becky says that parents have looked for it when interviewing her, because participation in the program assures them that their children will get the nutrition they need.

Without CACFP, Becky says that there would simply not be adequate income for her to do child care. She would earn more getting a job outside the home and paying for child care for her own. Or, she would have to increase her rates, making her child care less affordable, especially for the low income families that she serves. “If I didn’t get reimbursed,” she say, “chances are I wouldn’t do it.”
Case Study: Stabilizing Child Care Businesses

Andrea Domeier did not expect to become a child care provider, but when the local daycare closed down, she and her husband didn’t have any other options for taking care of their kids. There was only one other child care provider in their town, and she was full to capacity. So, Andrea started child care in September of 2006, caring for six children.

She serves two meals and a snack each day. Some of her kids’ favorite foods include string beans and oranges. According to Andrea, one of the key benefits of CACFP is the increased nutrition for the children.

Another important benefit is the CACFP reimbursement, which has helped Andrea’s business tremendously. Without the reimbursement, Andrea says she would have to raise rates in order to keep her business afloat. Otherwise, she simply wouldn’t be making enough money. But, parents in this small town of 300 in central Nebraska would ill be able to afford a rate hike, given their low wages. They would be forced to drive to another town for care.

“I actually don’t know if we’d be able to be open without it (CACFP)” – Andrea Domeier, on the impact of the food program.

Andrea is glad to be able to help families in her community while continuing to establish her child care business. The CACFP program has been instrumental in helping her stabilize and develop her child care. As she says, “I actually don’t know if we’d be able to be open without it.”
Case Study: Supporting Rural Entrepreneurs, Supporting Rural Communities

Amanda Scott, a child care provider in McCool Junction, says that the Child and Adult Care Food Program has helped make her family child care a more quality business. “The reimbursements, keeping track of what I’m serving, the nutritional guidelines, and having someone to answer to (make my child care) more professional,” she states. She used to think that she would just do child care until her kids became school age, but now she thinks she will develop a long term business. She is looking into getting licensed.

Not only has CACFP helped Amanda to become an entrepreneur, it has also supported her community by providing working families with a quality child care option. Amanda runs her family child care business in McCool Junction, a town of about 350 in central Nebraska. Her child care is full to capacity in a community where most parents have to commute for their work to Lincoln or York. Little industry exists in McCool, and working families can find it difficult to locate quality child care. Amanda’s sister-in-law also runs a child care business that is full to capacity.

Parents are definitely interested to find out that she participates in the CACFP program, Amanda says. They know that they are taking their kids to a place where the provider has to meet certain guidelines, and they can be sure that their kids will be fed well.

One of the other key benefits Amanda has discovered about doing CACFP is the wealth of information she has been able to access. She receives mailings about grants she can apply for to get licensed or expand her child care. She also receives newsletters with information ranging from calcium requirements for kids to healthy recipes she can use for her meals.

Amanda likes being able to use the program to coax her picky eaters to eat the healthy foods. However, the kids can also be adventurous. They really like trying new things, especially fresh fruits.

The CACFP reimbursements have definitely helped in paying for all the foods. As Amanda puts it, she doesn’t have to worry anymore about spending $50 a month just for milk. The payments have helped make her business more sustainable.

Overall, Amanda is very satisfied with the one and a half years she has been running her own child care, and she is planning for expansions in the future. CACFP has played an integral role in her successful experience with rural entrepreneurship.
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