



Child and Adult Care Food Program Participation by Independent Childcare Centers and Their Sponsors: Benefits and Challenges

Research Brief • October 2022

BACKGROUND

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal nutrition program for eligible children in participating licensed childcare centers and homes. In July 2021, administrative oversight of CACFP in California transitioned from the California Department of Education (CDE) to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). To inform CDSS in its new role, the CACFP Roundtable collaborated with the University of California Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI) to learn about benefits, challenges, and areas for improvement in CACFP from the perspective of independent centers (unaffiliated and not part of a larger organization) and their sponsors.



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STUDY METHODS

NPI conducted focus groups and one-on-one interviews with directors at 10 state contracted independent centers that operate CACFP directly with the state, 6 sponsored centers that operate CACFP through a sponsoring organization, and 5 CACFP sponsors of independent centers. The study centers and sponsors operate across all four regions of California—Northern, Central, Los Angeles, and Southern. The focus groups were led by a peer facilitator with CACFP experience and took place from December 2021 through January 2022. Participants were asked questions about CACFP participation benefits and challenges, the CACFP administrative transition to CDSS, and communication about CACFP to parents.

BENEFITS OF CACFP

Financial benefits, both to the centers and to the families they serve, were seen as the top benefit of operating CACFP.

“Probably the main reason why we participate in the program is to subsidize the cost [of food].” – State contracted independent center

“Kids that typically attend here are low-income and on subsidy programs... it really helped the families.” – State contracted independent center

CACFP’s **support in offering nutritious food** was also seen as an important benefit.

“We like the guidelines for food. It keeps healthy food in our center, as opposed to having parents bring whatever they want, which may not be nutritious.” – State contracted independent center

“I like the technical assistance. I like knowing that I’m serving the correct portions, the enhanced menu items, the different kinds of vegetables and whole grains.” – State contracted independent center

“They [the sponsor] have a dietitian that helps look over our menus just to validate the nutrition level and monitor all the food groups... and keeping us on track with the healthiest options that we can serve.” – Sponsored independent center

Sponsored independent centers appreciated the benefits of the relationship with their sponsor, particularly the **help with administrative and nutrition requirements**.

“[The sponsor] provides us with a system ... that helps to keep track of all of the food that we’ve served... and ... anything that we might have missed, like expired enrollment forms.” – Sponsored independent center

“They [the sponsor] help with a lot of information. I can call them. If I have questions, I’m able to get them on the phone.” – Sponsored independent center

However, half of the independent centers felt that they managed well without a sponsor; the other five independent centers either did not understand the sponsor system or were unable to find a sponsor.

CACFP PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Despite their appreciation of the benefits of operating CACFP, independent centers and sponsors recognized challenges.

Both state contracted independent centers and sponsors, but not sponsored independent centers, cited **paperwork**, whether actual or electronic, as their primary challenge.

"... getting it [paperwork] uploaded to the site ..."

– State contracted independent center

"... a lot of moving pieces, a lot of ways to mess up..."

– Sponsor

"I have no program ... I've been doing the claims and everything by hand." – Sponsor

Communication difficulties—sending and receiving information—was the other most common challenge named by sponsored independent centers and sponsors, but not state contracted independent centers.

"They'll [the sponsor] send me an email... I may not understand what they're talking about. So, it's a lot of back-and-forth emails." – Sponsored independent center

"... receiving two different answers for the same question from two different people..." – Sponsor

"[I] get these emails ... I go to the link and I still am unable to locate where that information is." – Sponsor

Technological difficulties were named by state contracted independent centers and sponsors, and less often by sponsored independent centers. These included challenges with:

- Website navigation
- Child Nutrition Information and Payment System (CNIPS)
- Slow sponsor-provided software
- Uploading forms
- Staff familiarity or ability with technology

Other challenges named by a minority of centers and sponsors included meeting nutrition standards, inadequate CACFP reimbursements, being short-staffed, administrative reviews, determining child eligibility due to requirements for reporting race/ethnicity and getting parents to complete forms that require income disclosure, and offering culturally appropriate foods consistent with CACFP meal patterns.

CENTER AND SPONSOR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING CACFP OPERATIONS

1. Make State-program communications consistent and accessible.

Make information easier to find and ensure it is up-to-date; provide improved telephone support and a website chat box; and include more frequent contact between State and CACFP programs.

2. Ease paperwork and online functions.

Simplify paperwork; increase online methods; improve sponsor-provided software speed.

3. Make it easier to enroll in and operate CACFP.

Improve orientation to CACFP; provide additional and targeted assistance with nutrition standards and administrative review preparation; enhance methods for networking and resource sharing; provide additional information on the benefits of participation through a sponsor and on the sponsoring organizations available.

4. Improve and support communications to families.

Include option for online forms; provide informational brochures about CACFP; develop nutrition resources to send home that are engaging, brief, eye-catching, accessible and in multiple languages.

5. Support CACFP meal service.

Enhance trainings on topics such as sample kid-friendly menus, simple recipes, and shopping guides; disseminate food substitution options and charts; increase the reimbursement



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For more information, please review the full publication:

Lee DL, Homel Vitale E, Marshall SK-D, Hecht C, Beck LT, Ritchie LD. Child and Adult Care Food Program Participation Benefits, Barriers and Facilitators for Independent Child Care Centers in California. *Nutrients*, 14(21):4449, 22 October 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14214449>