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**Barriers to Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Implementation Before and After COVID-19: A Qualitative, Collective Case Study**

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**Objectives:** SFSP, as a federal food assistance program, could ensure that children have sufficient nutritious food during summer. According to a 2016 USDA report, only 0.4–0.6% of eligible children participated in this program in Nebraska, which makes for one of the lowest SFSP participation rates in the U.S. This study aims to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted SFSP implementation in urban and rural settings across the state.

**Methods:** In this qualitative, collective case study, we conducted eight structured zoom interviews with three SFSP state agencies (two rural and one urban) and five SFSP sponsors (three rural and two urban) in the state of Nebraska who worked in SFSP in summers of 2019 and 2020. Two project team researchers independently coded interview transcripts following an inductive qualitative thematic analysis and used NVivo software to sort and organize the themes.

**Results:** Interviews revealed that the following themes of barriers in implementing SFSP before the COVID-19 pandemic were: 1) lack

of enough transportation to get kids to the meal sites, 2) SFSP staff shortage, 3) federal restrictions on getting schools qualified to run the SFSP, 4) time limitation and issues around starting a new program, 5) not having superintendents on board, and 6) reconstructing and remodeling the meal sites. Specific themes related to issues amplified by COVID were: 1) lack of transportation for food delivery in rural areas, 2) keeping up with COVID adjustments, and 3) meal preparation and food storage problems. Interestingly, most interviewees mentioned that COVID adjustments of SFSP made it easier to run the program by removing the requirements of physical meal sites for children and decreasing the 50% threshold, which allowed more schools to run the summer meals.

**Conclusions:** Insights from this study may inform the development of policies that expand food access to vulnerable families. On the organizational level, this includes providing participating kids and their parents with both meal distribution options - meal sites and delivery options - during summer. On the policy level, this calls for revising the eligibility of SFSP by decreasing the threshold level from 50% to 30% to allow more schools in low-income neighborhoods to participate.

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