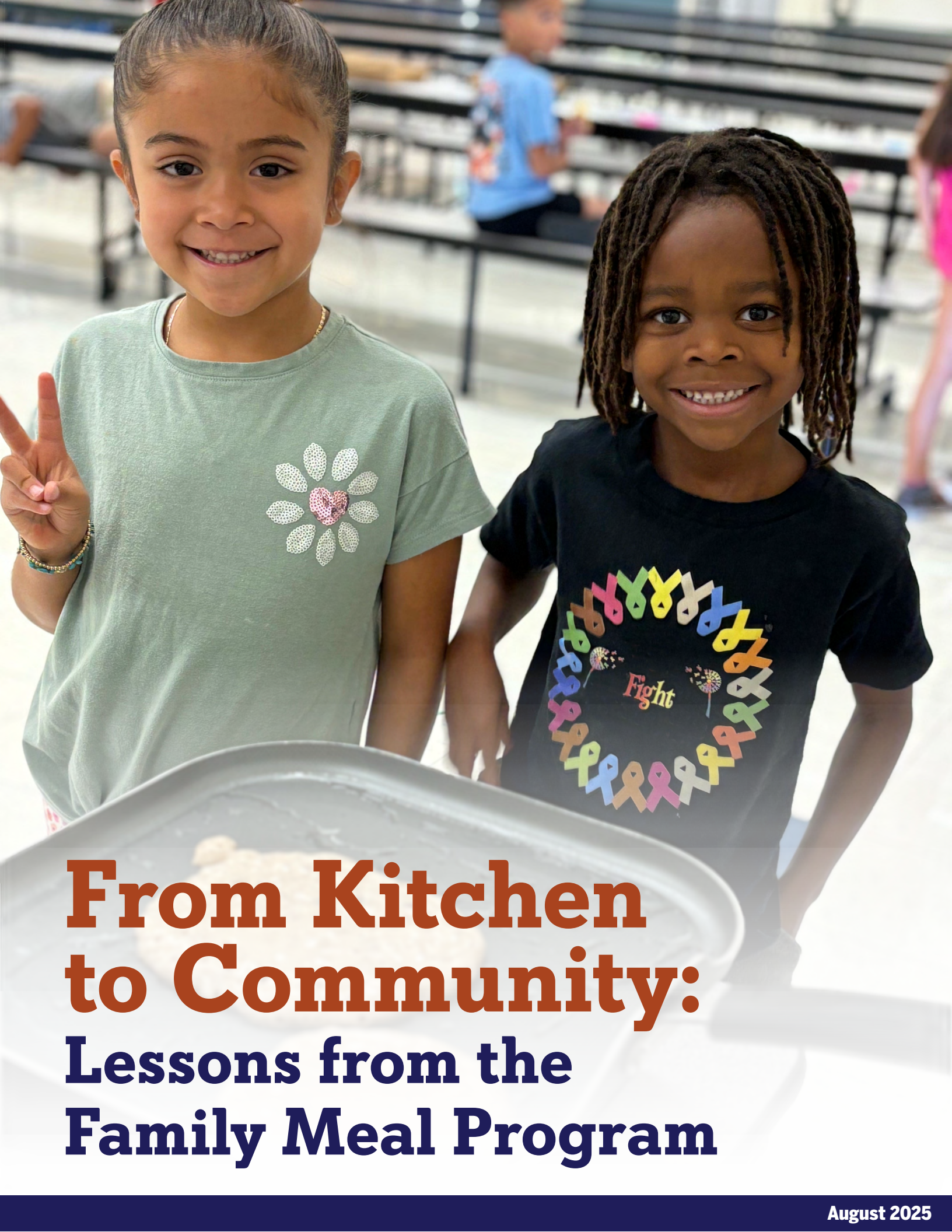




From Kitchen to Community: Lessons from the Family Meal Program

💧💧 People feel stigmatized by food insecurity. Oftentimes, they receive a selection of groceries they did not choose. It may not include items their families enjoy, which can be tough on them. People who are not food insecure often say, ‘Well, at least they are getting food.’ No, it is not ‘at least they are getting food.’ These individuals are hungry, and food is a human right. No parent or caregiver ever intends to serve food to their families that they do not like. **Food is love, it is care, it is nutrition.** Family Meal gives us the ability to demonstrate love, care, and nutrition. I believe Family Meal built confidence and trust with our guests. It showed that we are striving to do things in a much more dignified way.”

-Family Meal, Community-based Organization Partner

From Kitchen to Community: Lessons from the Family Meal Program written by Tiffany Wilson, Social Research and Evaluation Consultant, and Civic Thread.

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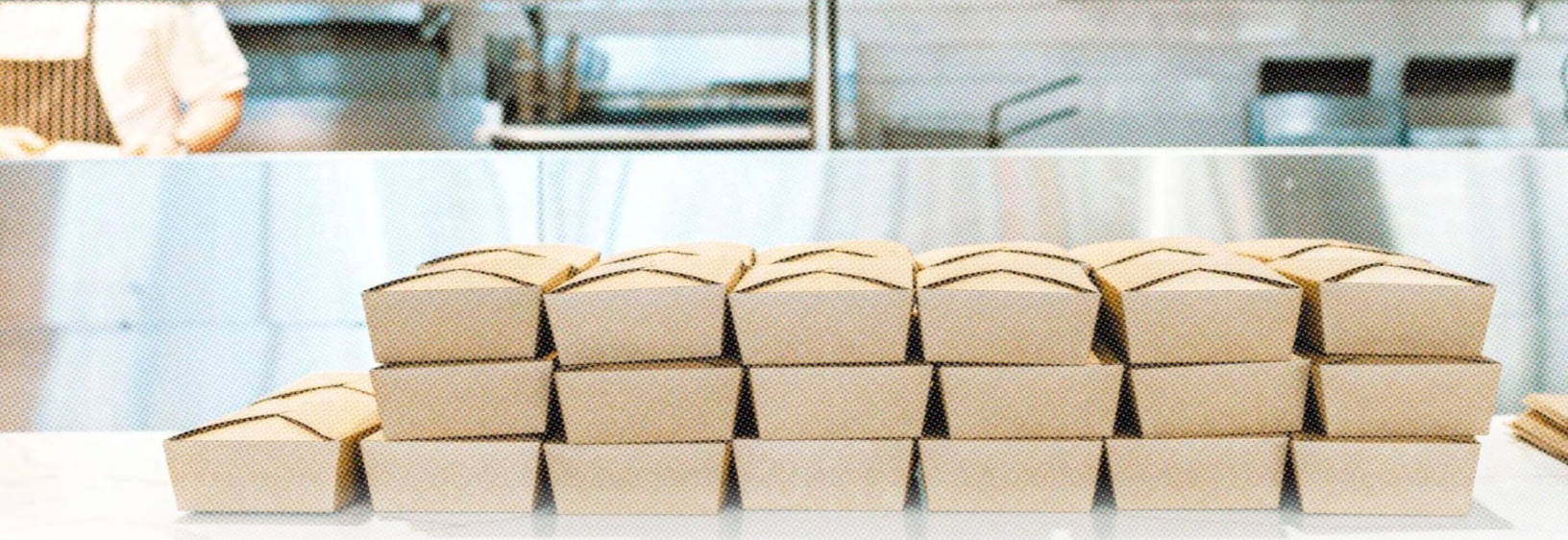


Photo: Canon restaurant

Executive Summary

Shortly after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, unemployment in the restaurant industry and food insecurity increased sharply across the United States. **Family Meal Sacramento (Family Meal)** is a chef-driven initiative launched at the start of the pandemic to provide an economic lifeline for restaurants while addressing food insecurity. Through Family Meal, restaurants receive funding (e.g., philanthropic and state grants) to prepare meals distributed free of charge to community members. The program emerged from the pandemic as a culturally responsive partnership between restaurants and community-based organizations (CBOs) serving racially and culturally diverse communities. Since it began in March 2020, Family Meal has delivered over 750,000 meals to Sacramento County residents needing food assistance.

Family Meal emerged from the pandemic as a culturally responsive partnership between restaurants and community-based organizations (CBOs) serving racially and culturally diverse communities.

In 2024, the Center at Sierra Health Foundation contracted with Tiffany Wilson and Civic Thread to evaluate the Family Meal program. The evaluation focused on understanding the **program model**, how program partners operationalized **cultural responsiveness**, the program's contribution to **food security**, and its **economic impact**. The evaluation included 20 interviews with program partners, five interviews with the Family Meal program administrator, and a review of relevant documents. Presented in this summary are the key findings, key learnings, and recommendations derived from the evaluation.

Key Findings & Learnings

Program Model



KEY FINDING

The Family Meal program model relied on local restaurateurs' expertise, leveraged existing CBO programs, and gave its partners autonomy to effectively address an urgent need while showing genuine care for the people served.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Family Meal established a geographically dispersed network of restaurants and CBOs through informal and formal networks and outreach efforts.
- Most restaurants and CBOs had little direct communication.
- Family Meal integrated seamlessly into CBOs program and services without straining staff capacity.
- CBOs had discretion regarding whom to give meals to and how many meals a household received.
- Adherence to portion and menu requirements varied.

Food Insecurity



KEY FINDING

Family Meal increases access to healthy food by leveraging the capacity of local restaurants and CBOs to deliver high-quality meals to individuals and families in need.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Family Meal reduced household stress, enabled families to spend more quality time together, and offered CBOs an opportunity to show care for the individuals they serve.
- The demand for food significantly exceeds the resources available for the Family Meal program.

Key Findings & Learnings, continued

Cultural Responsiveness



KEY FINDING

Family Meal intentionally partnered with restaurants owned by people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, who prepared meals that reflected the cultures of most meal recipients.



KEY LEARNINGS

- The restaurant partners were racially and culturally diverse.
- The primary focus during menu development was variety.
- The individuals who received the meals represented various ages, ethnicities, cultures, races, and lived experiences.
- CBOs support the option for deeper coordination with the program administrator to address the food needs of all clients.

Economic Impact



KEY FINDING

The program provided financial support to restaurants during COVID-19-related closures, while also offering an opportunity to support the community.



KEY LEARNINGS

- The positive economic impact of Family Meal declined over time.
- Family Meal increased the visibility of the restaurants and ushered in new business opportunities.
- The restaurants incorporated Family Meal preparation into their operation in several ways.

* Recommendations *

The evaluation revealed recommendations to improve Family Meal's functioning, delivery, impact, and reach.

- * **Convene the community and restaurant partners biannually** for partners to build and strengthen relationships; share resources, knowledge, and expertise; discuss program experiences and best practices; and strategize for program improvement and growth.
- * **Implement a quality control system** to ensure consistently high standards for meal quality and portion sizes.
- * **Increase the frequency of communication** between the program administrator, the restaurant, and CBO partners to enhance program responsiveness, flexibility, and adaptability.
- * **Add a program advisor with a strong connection to the communities served** to support the program administrator and guide program implementation.
- * **Offer CBOs the option to select menus** to accommodate clients' cultural and nutritional needs.
- * **Improve the consistency in the number and frequency of meal orders restaurants receive** to ensure economic stability and support the integration of Family Meal into their daily operations.
- * **Consider a 50%/50% payment schedule** where restaurants receive a portion of their payment upfront to cover supply costs, to alleviate the financial burden on small and newly established restaurants.
- * **Develop a robust and strategic marketing plan** to increase visibility, attract funding, and elevate program partners.
- * **Provide food safety training for CBOs** as a precautionary measure.
- * **Establish a data management system** to support data analysis and reporting.
- * **Coordinate culturally tailored meals in advance of delivery** so all recipients see their culture reflected in the meals they receive.

Over the past five years, Family Meal has become a vital part of Sacramento County's emergency food system. Interviews with CBOs and restaurant partners highlight the program's strength, particularly its flexibility and ability to serve people from diverse backgrounds and housing situations. Family Meal stands out as a valuable model for leveraging partnerships and existing infrastructure to meet urgent needs with care and dignity. While the program has demonstrated a significant impact, ongoing gaps between the demand for food and available resources highlight the need for continued investment to sustain and expand its reach.

Introduction



Three Phases of Family Meal Sacramento: March 2020 – December 2024

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, with 118,000 reported cases in 114 countries and 4,291 reported deaths.¹ Countries began to restrict travel, implement curfews, and enforce quarantines to curb the spread of the virus. In the United States, within a month of the pandemic declaration, unemployment surged to 14.8%, with the service sector experiencing the second-largest job losses among all industries.² Additionally, the rate of food insecurity—defined as the number of people lacking sufficient food—peaked at 20.4%.³

On March 19, 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a statewide stay-at-home order that closed all but essential businesses (e.g., hospitals, grocery stores, banks, gas stations). Due to the ban on indoor dining, restaurants had to transition from in-person dining to take-out or delivery meals. In Sacramento County, the service industry's rapid loss of revenue and increased unemployment, coupled with the rise in food insecurity, led to the creation of the Family Meal Sacramento program (Family Meal).

Family Meal is a chef-driven initiative designed to tackle food insecurity by supporting restaurant employees and small businesses. Created by restaurateurs who were “desperate to figure out how to keep the lights on” during the pandemic, **Family Meal pays restaurants to prepare meal kits for individuals and families experiencing food insecurity.** The meal kits include four fully cooked, ready-to-heat and eat meals. Each meal features a protein, a vegetable, and a starch.

Since its inception in March 2020, the Family Meal program has evolved through three phases: Emergency, Community Recovery, and Sustaining. These phases reflect the transition of COVID-19 from a pandemic (disruptive outbreak) to an endemic (constant presence).

The **Emergency Phase** started in March 2020 and ended in July 2022. **Family Meal was one of many strategies employed to protect community health during the Emergency Phase.** The program delivered meals to older adults at high-risk of contracting the virus, as well as to vulnerable and quarantined people of color who COVID-19 disproportionately impacted. Family Meal intentionally partnered with restaurants owned by people of color, whose cuisines reflected the cultures of those receiving the meals. Throughout the emergency phase, the Family Meal partners developed and improved a program that served as an economic lifeline for restaurants and became an integral part of the emergency food system in Sacramento County.

The Family Meal program has evolved through three phases: Emergency, Community Recovery, and Sustaining.

The **Community Recovery Phase** lasted about eight months, from June 2022 to February 2023. During this period, vaccinations became widely accessible, community-based organizations (CBOs) transitioned from providing emergency services to offering regular programs, and restaurant owners worked to stabilize and regain their financial footing. **Family Meal adapted to this shift by moving from “emergency food” delivered to individuals’ homes to a “community-based hub model,” including food lockers, schools, and community centers that distributed meals to food-insecure individuals and families in “high-need” areas.** By the end of this phase, Family Meal had built a strong network of restaurants and CBOs throughout Sacramento County.

The **Sustaining Phase** began in March 2023 and lasted until December 2024. **The goal of this phase was to develop a scalable and replicable program that could adapt to various funding sources and to strengthen collaboration with local restaurant partners to increase access to healthy food.** California Department of Housing and Community Development provided the bulk of funding during this period.

This evaluation report focuses on the sustaining phase and the Family Meal community hub model. **See Appendix A** for a detailed description of each program phase.

About this evaluation report

In 2024, The Center at Sierra Health Foundation (The Center) contracted with Tiffany Wilson and Civic Thread to conduct the first evaluation of the Family Meal program since its inception. The evaluation aimed to determine what worked well and opportunities to refine future program iterations. This evaluation was informed by: (1) five guided conversations with Clay Nutting, Family Meal Program Administrator; (2) semi-structured discussions with nine, or 56% of Family Meal restaurant partners; (3) semi-structured conversations with 11, or 61% of the Family Meal community-based organization partners (CBO); (4) secondary analysis of meal distribution data collected through the program; and (5) a media and document review.

This report evaluates Family Meal’s strengths and opportunities related to  **key learnings about the program model, food insecurity, cultural responsiveness, and economic impact.** The report concludes with recommendations to enhance the program. The report appendix contains a comprehensive program history, details about the restaurant and CBO partners, and a description of the evaluation methodology.

Program Model





KEY FINDING: The Family Meal program model relied on local restaurateurs' expertise, leveraged existing CBO programs, and gave its partners autonomy to effectively address an urgent need while showing genuine care for the people served.

This section addresses the restaurant and CBO network developed through the program, the program's flexibility in integrating with existing CBO services without overburdening staff, and the impact of granting CBOs autonomy to decide who to distribute meals to.



KEY LEARNING 1: Family Meal established a geographically dispersed network of restaurants and CBOs through informal and formal networks and outreach efforts.

Family Meal focused on **engaging restaurants and community organizations in “high need” areas throughout Sacramento County**. Partner recruitment (see the list of partners on pages 13 & 14) began with the founders of Family Meal inviting restaurants and CBOs from their network to join the program. Additionally, business improvement districts, chambers of commerce, and local government staff and elected officials provided partner referrals. Some partners expressed interest in joining the Family Meal program or submitted proposals in response to a request for qualified contractors.

Figure 1 on page 15 shows the locations of the Family Meal restaurants and CBO meal distribution sites. The map illustrates that the **Family Meal network extends throughout Sacramento County**, from the Foothill Farms community in the north to the City of West Sacramento in the west, the Orangevale area in the east, and the City of Elk Grove in the south. Most restaurants and meal distribution sites are situated in the City of Sacramento. **Areas to consider for program expansion include high-need zip codes in the southern and easternmost parts of the county and neighborhoods with few meal distribution sites.**



Table 1 | Restaurant Partners

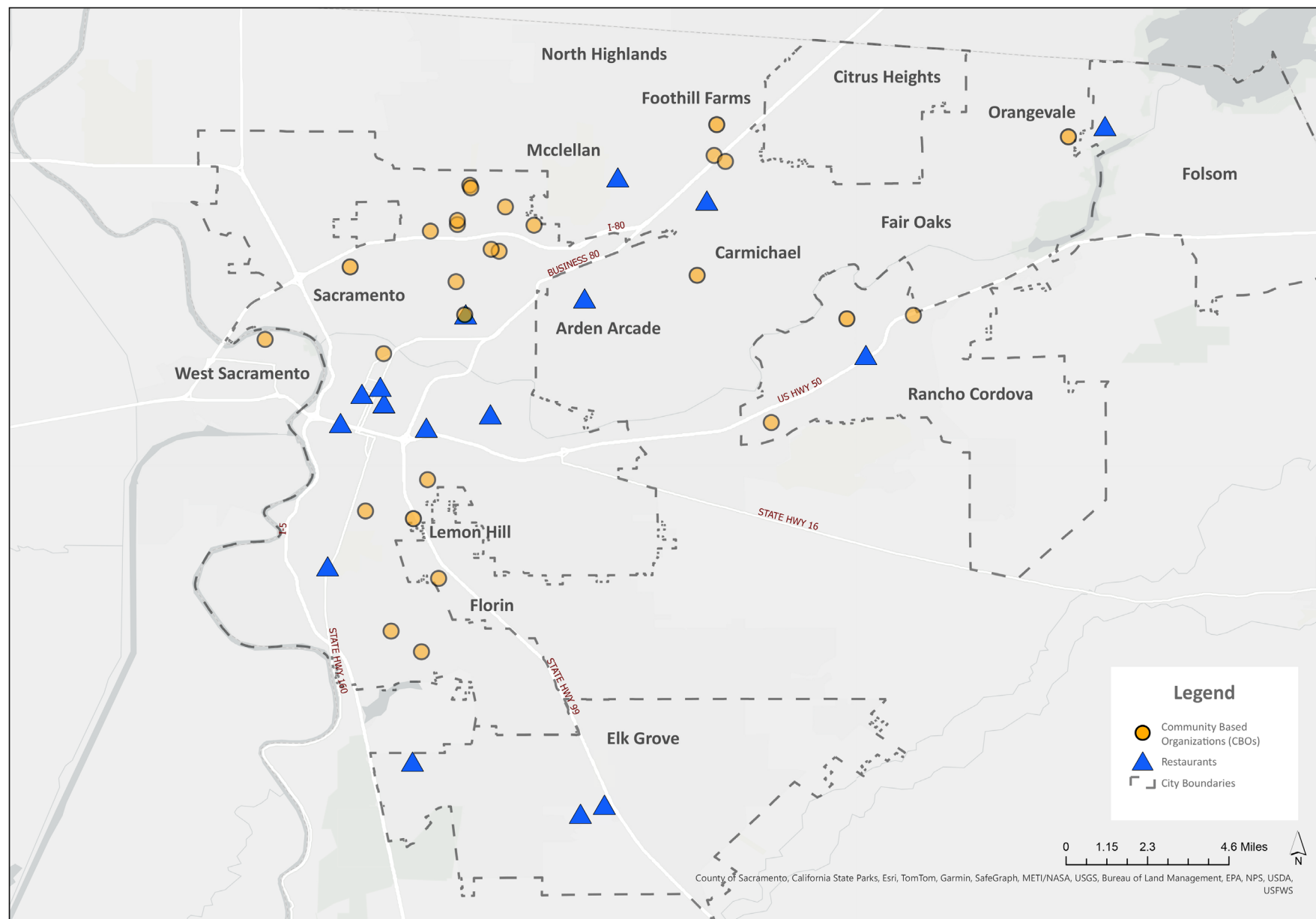
Name	Cuisine
Casa Talum	Mexican
Costa Vida	Mexican
Netillo's Tacos	Mexican
Mayahuel	Mexican
Todo Un Poco	Mexican
Xochimilco	Mexican
Canon	New American
Mulvaney's B&L	New American
Café Elk Grove	Cafe
Generational Global Gardens	Cafe
Madar	Afghan
Burgess Brothers	Barbeque
TLC Catering	Catering
Drewski's	Comfort Food
Binchoyaki	Japanese-style barbeque
Colo's Soul Food	Soul Food



Table 2 | Community-Based Organization Partners

Name	Type
Health Education Council	Nonprofit
Empowering Possibilities Unlimited, Inc.	Nonprofit
La Familia Counseling Center	Nonprofit
Robert Family Development Center	Nonprofit
Rose Family Creative Empowerment Center	Nonprofit
Sacramento Youth Center	Nonprofit
Sacramento ACT	Nonprofit
Valley Hi Resource Center	Nonprofit
Joey's Food Locker	Food Bank
Orangevale-Fair Oaks Food Bank	Food Bank
Rancho Cordova Food Locker	Food Bank
Natomas Unified School District	School
Robla School District	School
Sacramento City Unified School District	School
Liberty Towers Church	Church
Masjid Annur	Mosque & School
Masjid As Sabur	Mosque
Mission Oaks Recreation and Park District	Recreation & Park District

Figure 1
Location of Community-based Organization Meal Distribution Sites and Restaurant Partners





KEY LEARNING 2: Most restaurants and CBOs had little direct communication.

Clay Nutting, a restaurant owner and a Family Meal founder, has served as the program administrator since the program's inception. Clay managed all program logistics and communication. Clay's role involved assessing the CBOs' needs and strategically aligning them with suitable restaurant partners, establishing meal delivery schedules, locations, and frequency, managing restaurant invoices and payments, and securing funding. **The program administrator also oriented both community and restaurant partners to the program.**

Clay's initial discussions with CBOs focused on understanding the organizations and the populations they serve, including cultural and dietary preferences and requirements (e.g., halal), the number of meals needed, the frequency of meal deliveries, and the refrigeration capacity. The program administrator used this information when contracting with a restaurant to prepare meals for the organization.

Clay met with each restaurant for the program onboarding process to discuss their meal production capacity, preferred delivery dates, and the meal kit nutrition, allergies, menus, and distribution requirements. For example, each meal "has to be a well-balanced portion of protein, starch, and vegetables," cannot contain "shellfish or nuts," must be packed in a "stackable container," and include a printed copy of the menu with reheating instructions. The program administrator also emphasized the importance of restaurants delivering meals to the community organization on time.

Restaurant partners described the orientation as "very easy" and "very helpful." The general sentiment among the restaurants was that "Clay was pretty thorough; he made it clear what the expectations were for deliveries and drop-offs."

Most restaurants and CBOs had little, if any, direct communication with each other outside of meal deliveries. Restaurants typically communicated with CBOs only when unexpected issues caused a meal delivery delay. Similarly, most community partners did not know which restaurant was providing the meals and lacked contact information for the restaurants; thus, the CBOs "did not reach out to restaurants directly, we talked with Clay."

Restaurant partners described the orientation as "very easy" and "very helpful."



KEY LEARNING 3: Family Meal integrated seamlessly into the CBOs' programs and services without straining staff capacity. A strength of Family Meal is its flexibility to incorporate into preexisting programs

and services without necessitating increased staffing or operational changes on the part of the CBOs. Combining restaurant-prepared meals with programming required minimal effort, as community partners shared:

“It was a really easy fit with what we were already doing. It was not much more to add Family Meal.”

“We just layered the ready-to-eat meals on top, and our clients really enjoyed that.”

The ease of integrating Family Meal partly resulted from community organizations establishing the “stipulated time” for meal delivery, which aligned with when clients were engaged in programs and services. This alleviated the need for CBOs to hire staff, establish new programs to facilitate meal distribution, or develop additional lines of communication to promote the program.

An unanticipated benefit of Family Meal was its ability to “draw more people” to the CBOs programs and services. One-third of the community organizations credited Family Meal with increasing the number of clients participating in programming, for example,

“We have utilized it [Family Meal] as an incentive. It does draw more people in ... just getting their attention and getting families to come. Family Meal was a good incentive, a good hook.”

“Family Meal was definitely a big part of the growth of our increase of families coming to us ... When the hot meals kicked in, it really helped us expand even more.”





KEY LEARNING 4: CBOs had discretion regarding whom to give meals to and how many meals a household received.

A strength of the program is that the **CBOs were trusted with deciding who to distribute meals to, rather than having a prescriptive criteria list** that prevents individuals in need from receiving services. One interviewee explained,

“To provide a resource that does not have restrictions is really rewarding. You trust us to serve the families we know are in need in our area, without placing restrictions on what they have to qualify for. That is really rewarding because we get a lot of people for whom we have resources, but they must do x, y, z, and be in these things. This is one of the first services we received where we can serve without barriers to the families we know are in need.”

The community organizations chose to distribute the meals on a **first-come, first-served basis or by prioritizing those in greatest need**. Staff developed trusting relationships with the individuals they served, enabling them to identify those who were most in need of services. The **organizations approached decisions regarding need differently but with care**, as exemplified by the following quotes,

“We always try to get the most valuable resource to the most deserving or the most needy as possible ... when it comes to the most deserving, single mothers with multiple children are priority number one and priority two delivering to families who are living hand to mouth, like we do not know how they are surviving.”

“We have had some families who have experienced tragedies, or we know they are really in a tough spot. We spend time getting to know our families in our communities to serve them best with what they need.”

Other partners established a distribution system to ensure that “everyone has a fair opportunity to get a meal ... it is not the same people every week.” One organization outlined its system for tracking and distributing meals among all clients served.

“We tried to serve everybody. If a family was served this week, and then we had families we could not serve, those families would get served next week.”

Community organizations also had discretion over the number of meals distributed to each household. Notably, all the organizations determined the number of meals to distribute based on household size. For example, several organizations shared, “If the family is a household of four or less, they get one meal kit. If it is a household of five or more, they get two meal kits.”



KEY LEARNING 5: Adherence to portion and menu requirements varied. Over half of the community organizations interviewed described the meal quality as “extremely high” and the portion size as “extremely consistent.” However, some

CBOs occasionally received frozen food or meal kits with portions that “seemed to shrink a little bit,” which “would not feed a family of four, but rather two people.” Community organizations provided their clients with extra meal kits to accommodate smaller portions. Those who received frozen food distributed the meals to housed clients who had the means to reheat frozen food.

According to program requirements, the meal kits should include a simple menu (e.g., pasta with Bolognese sauce, green salad, and bread); however, **half of the CBOs recalled consistently receiving a menu, while the other half reported not always receiving one.** One organization adapted to the inconsistency by printing menus for inclusion with the meal kits.

Nearly half of the community organizations interviewed received meal kits with allergens clearly labeled. However, others “do not recall the allergens being identified.” For most organizations, allergens did not pose an issue; however, a few served residents with severe allergies. When a client had a known allergy (e.g., yeast, eggs, nuts, gluten, fish) and the meal kit lacked an ingredient or allergen list, staff consulted with the family about food safety, allowing them to decide whether to accept the meal. **An opportunity to strengthen the program is to implement a quality control process focusing on the meal portion, menu, and allergen requirements.**

Food Insecurity





KEY FINDING: Family Meal increases access to healthy food by leveraging the capacity of local restaurants and CBOs to deliver high-quality meals to individuals and families in need. This section discusses the program's contribution to food access and the

scale of food insecurity in Sacramento.

KEY LEARNING 1: Family Meal reduced household stress, enabled families to spend more quality time together, and offered community-based organizations an opportunity to show care for the individuals they serve. Family Meal stands out from other food programs because it

provides precooked, restaurant-prepared meals. Its uniqueness results in advantages beyond merely providing food.

Receiving precooked meals helped alleviate stress for families facing both food and time

scarcity. A community partner shared that Family Meal reduced stress for their families because, “for one meal, they do not have to worry about putting food on that table.” The time saved by not having to cook a meal “could potentially support time that they spend with their children” or time spent engaged in other activities. Family Meal relieved the mental burden of meal planning, allowing families to reclaim their time together.

The program also served to “show our client that our community cares, that we care about them.” One community partner spoke about the trust established with the community through an expression of care and dignity:

“One of the things the Family Meal did was improve trust with our guests. They saw that by implementing a program like Family Meal, it was another level of care we were trying to provide for them, and it built trust between us and our guests. They recognized our desire to offer them high-quality food, and they truly appreciate that. People feel stigmatized by food insecurity. Oftentimes, they receive a selection of groceries they did not choose. It may not include items their families enjoy, which can be tough on them. People who are not food insecure often say, ‘Well, at least they are getting food.’ No, it is not ‘at least they are getting food.’ These individuals are hungry, and food is a human right. No parent or caregiver ever intends to serve food to their families that they do not like. Food is love, it is care, it is nutrition. Family Meal gives us the ability to demonstrate love, care, and nutrition. I believe it built confidence and trust with our guests. It showed that we are striving to do things in a much more dignified way.”



KEY LEARNING 2: The demand for food significantly exceeds the resources available for the Family Meal program. All CBOs interviewed identified food insecurity as one of the most significant issues in Sacramento County, and noted increasing access to food as a reason they joined the program. Family Meal provided an opportunity to offer “healthier” and “better-quality food” to residents.

The CBOs shared that individuals who received the meals would arrive “90 minutes” or “three to four hours,” before distribution, and that within “15 to 20 minutes,” the meals were gone. Most **CBOs reported having more clients than the number of meals received** and expressed that they would “love to get more meals.” The overall sentiment among CBO partners is that **food insecurity remains chronic and widespread, and Family Meal has a role in addressing a significant need.**

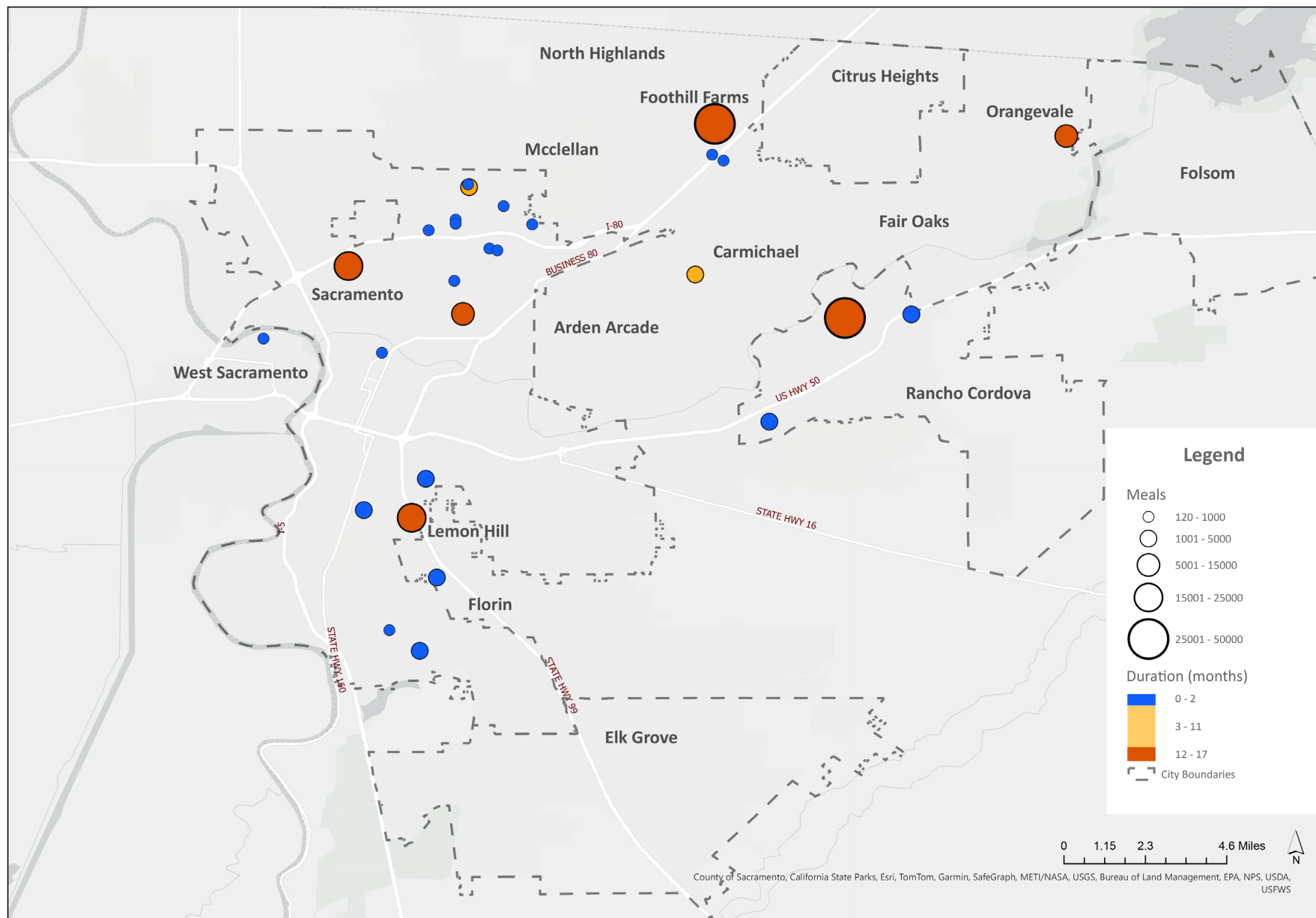
Between June 2023 and December 2024, CBOs distributed over 170,000 meals throughout Sacramento County. In Figure 2 on the following page, circles mark the geographic location of meal distribution sites. The size of the circles corresponds to the number of meals distributed at each location; the larger the circle, the higher the number of meals distributed. The circle's color represents the number of months the organization distributed meals at that location; the darker the circle, the longer the CBO distributed meals there.

The map displays the locations of the CBOs' distribution sites, which were managed by one of the 18 CBO partners, and the scope of meal distribution, providing insight into the program's reach. As expected, the data shows that longer participation in the program is linked to more meals being distributed—six of the 30 sites have provided meals for a year or more. The larger, dark orange circles on the map highlight these six sites. **For individuals and families facing food insecurity, these six long-term sites provided consistent access to restaurant-prepared meals throughout the County** (including North Sacramento, Fruitridge/Broadway, Rancho Cordova, Carmichael, and Orangevale).

The other 24 sites illustrated on the map distributed fewer meals over a shorter period. In some cases, the shorter duration for meal distribution was due to the funds available to support the program; in other instances, this was due to the design of the CBOs' programs. For example, the Sacramento City Unified School District provided meals to students and their families as part of their summer program at five elementary schools, and Sacramento ACT offered meals on an interim and emergency basis to migrants and asylum seekers flown from Texas to California. While these sites dispersed meals for a shorter period, the locations were spread throughout Sacramento County, which helped connect food-insecure individuals and families to a vital resource.

CBOs shared that individuals who received the meals would arrive “90 minutes” or “three to four hours,” before distribution, and that within “15 to 20 minutes,” the meals were gone.

Figure 2
Duration of Program Participation and Number of Meals Distributed, June 2023 - December 2024



Another way to evaluate the program's contribution to food access is to understand the demand for food in Sacramento County and Family Meal's reach within Sacramento County's emergency food system.

Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services (SFBFS) is the largest hunger relief organization in Sacramento County and estimates that one in four residents faces food insecurity. SFBFS supplies food to a network of 110 partner agencies for distribution to those in need.

Two of the Family Meal CBO partners who distributed prepared meals are also part of the SFBFS partner agency network. To assess Family Meals' food access role in Sacramento County, we compared the number of households that received SFBFS food and meal kits from these two CBO partners in May 2024. We chose May 2024 for this comparison because it had the highest number of meal kits distributed during the 18 months from June 2023 to December 2024.

In May 2024, these **two CBOs distributed SFBFS food to 7,045 households and meal kits to 1,510 households**. For this analysis, we assumed that each meal kit served one household (4 people or less). Thus, **21% of the households that received SFBFS food (7,045 households) in May 2024, also received a meal kit.**

Another way to assess Sacramento County's food needs and Family Meals' role in the emergency food system is to compare the number of households that received a meal kit with the number of households that received food through the SFBFS partner network in Sacramento County. In May 2024, SFBFS's 110 partner agencies served 83,920 households, while Family Meal's 18 CBO partner network served 3,360 households, which is 4% of the households served through the SFBFS partner agency network.

This analysis highlights the prevalence of food insecurity in Sacramento County and Family Meals' contribution to increasing food access. Family Meal used all available funding to provide restaurant-prepared meals to organizations that help individuals and families in need. However, the demand for food greatly exceeds the resources available for the program.

Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services is the largest hunger relief organization in Sacramento County and estimates that one in four residents faces food insecurity.

Cultural Responsiveness





KEY FINDING: Family Meal intentionally partnered with restaurants owned by people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, who prepared meals that reflected the cultures of most meal recipients.

This section's key learnings reveal how cultural responsiveness informed the selection of restaurant partners and menus in response to meal recipients' cultural, religious, and dietary preferences or needs.



KEY LEARNING 1: The restaurant partners were racially and culturally diverse. Family Meal embraced an equitable and culturally responsive partnership strategy to recruit restaurants grounded in the racial (e.g., Black and Latinx) and cultural

backgrounds (e.g., Soul, Japanese-style barbecue, and Afghan) of the communities served. When discussing why they joined the program, one restaurant recalled this deliberate approach to partnerships:

“There was a gap; he [program administrator] needed more diversity, especially in many communities he is serving. People of Color want to see their culture reflected on their plate.”

Many restaurants were in the communities where the CBOs distributed meals. A restaurant owner addressed the authenticity of partnering with small, locally owned establishments from the communities served, stating, “No one can provide culture. When you are the face and the voice of the people you serve, your labor reflects that.”



KEY LEARNING 2: The primary focus during menu development was variety.

Most restaurants were unaware of the “cultural backgrounds,” food preferences, or needs of the people receiving the meals. The restaurants learned a little about the “demographics of the recipients by making food deliveries and talking to the coordinators at the delivery sites.” When asked if the meals they prepared for Family Meal were based on what they served at their restaurants or the characteristics of the meal recipients, most partners responded that their **primary consideration was to “cater to people more broadly” by providing variety.**

The restaurants “did not just stick to what we were known for,” and tried to “mix it up between different types of cuisine and ethnicities of cuisine.” **Most restaurants frequently changed their menus to avoid duplication.** For instance, a restaurant partner mentioned, “We try to rotate our menus quite a lot, so people are not tasting the same food every other week or every couple of weeks.” The frequency with which restaurants changed their menus was partly based on their meal delivery schedules. If a restaurant “delivered to a site every week, then we provide a different meal each week.” A few partners took the age range of the meal recipients into account. They created menus that “children to an older generation could enjoy” or “kid-friendly kits,” particularly when delivering meals to a school or community center.

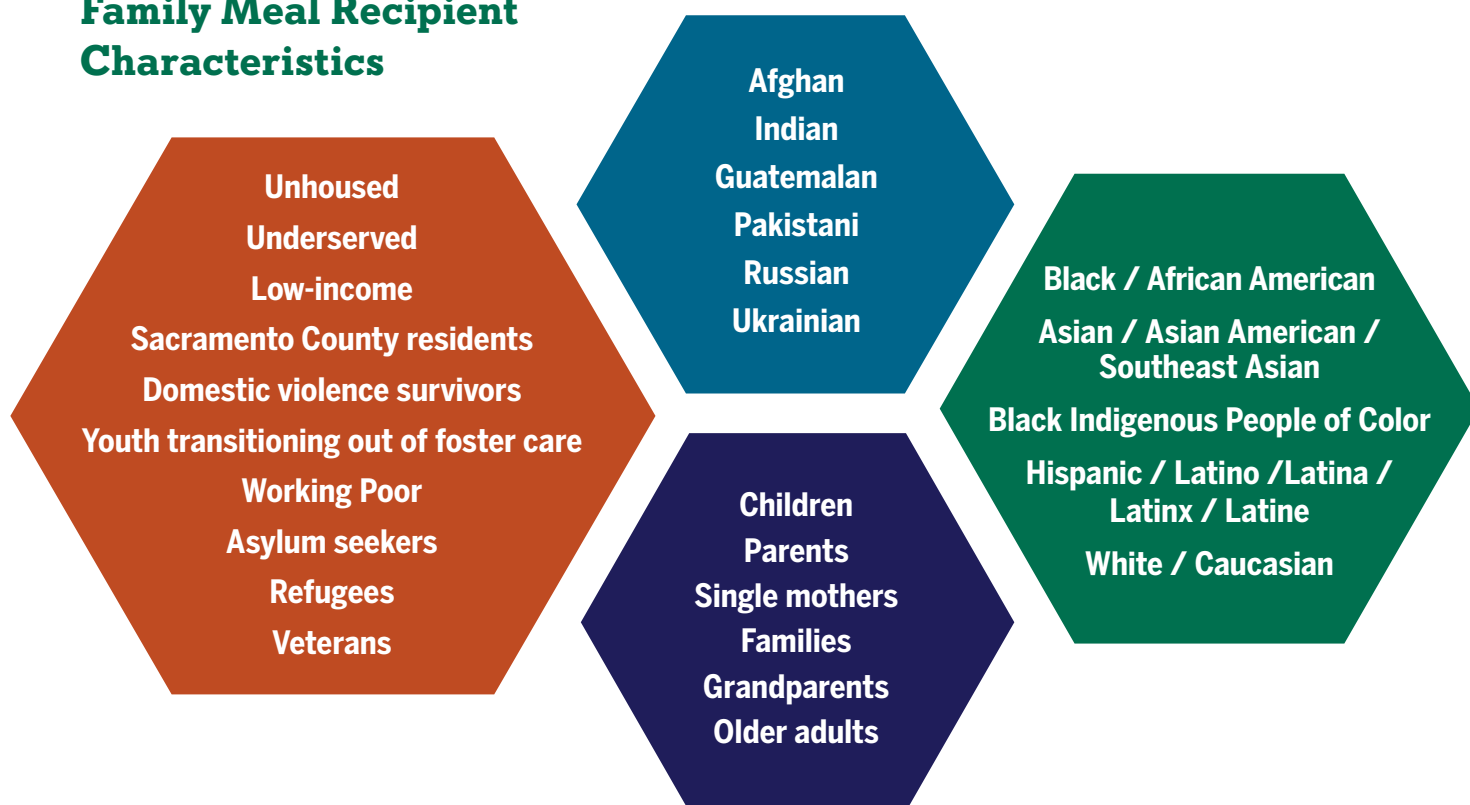


KEY LEARNING 3: The individuals who received the meals represent various ages, ethnicities, cultures, races, and lived experiences. A strength of the Family

Meal program lies in the diversity of the people it serves. The graphic below presents

information about the meal recipients' characteristics gathered from the interviews with CBO partners. One of the benefits of precooked meals is the ability to “serve families with varying needs or living situations.” **Family Meal works for individuals and families who lack access to a kitchen or cooking utensils, who might not be able to cook, or who may not know how to prepare meals with the ingredients in a food box.** Family Meal enabled community organizations to “serve everybody, and we do not have to worry about whether or not families will be able to consume the meal because it is prepared.” The diversity of the meal recipients is a testament to the program’s adaptability and the reach and inclusivity of the organizations that distributed the meals.

Figure 3
Family Meal Recipient Characteristics





KEY LEARNING 4: Community partners support the option for deeper coordination with the program administrator to address the food needs of all clients.

Most CBO partners responded positively when asked if Family Meal met the food preferences or needs of those served. The **CBOs identified the variety of meals provided through the program as an effective way to cater to a diverse clientele**, as illustrated by the following quote:

“There was a wide variety of restaurants and different types of culturally relevant foods, so that the families we were serving could see themselves and identify with some of the food they were eating.”

The CBOs also discussed how the variety of meals allowed individuals to “explore different types of food” unfamiliar to them. While receiving a variety of meals was the norm, some community organizations did not get “a lot of variety” or received the “same meal weekly,” and expressed a preference for “variation in the meals.”

Family Meal met most recipients’ cultural, religious, and dietary preferences. However, community partners “occasionally” or “infrequently” encountered issues when the meals did not reflect the cultures of a portion (10% to 20%) of their clients. For example, the meal kits sometimes included pork, which most community organizations reported was a challenge for Muslim individuals and families, as well as for those with vegetarian diets. One partner shared, “The biggest challenge is when a family does not eat a particular meat. We have some who do not eat pork, and more and more, we have families that do not eat seafood.” Additionally, a few organizations served clients who were diabetic or had high blood pressure, necessitating low-carbohydrate and low-sodium meals. Some of the meals provided were “really high-carb meals with spaghetti and dinner rolls, and that is not good for a diabetic.”

When asked if they would like to occasionally receive meals that accommodated the clientele whose cultural or dietary needs or preferences were unmet by Family Meal, the CBOs had divided opinions. Half of the CBOs expressed concern that 80% of their clients may be “unsure about those items” and reluctant to take the meals that reflected the cultures of a smaller percentage of their clients. The other half were supportive and believed it “is not fair to the 10% to 15% to make do with what they are given, just because they are 10% to 15%.” **The partners agreed that offering an option to meet the food needs of their clients through a deeper level of coordination with the program administrator would be beneficial.**

A few CBOs discussed coordinating culturally relevant meal kits two to four weeks ahead of delivery to provide time to plan events and/or outreach to clients, as illustrated by the following quote:

“We could build an event around it, outreach to families with a language barrier, and advertise to those families, have a night where they come and we can provide them with that very specific resource.”

Economic Impact





KEY FINDING: The program provided financial support to restaurants during COVID-19-related closures, while also offering an opportunity to support the community.

This section discusses key insights about the program's economic impact during and after the pandemic, as well as the restaurants' commitment to partnering with the program to support the community.



KEY LEARNING 1: Restaurants endured COVID-19 shutdowns with income generated from preparing meals.

The restaurant owners referred to Family Meal as an economic “blessing in disguise” and a source of “peace of mind” during COVID-19. Funding from meal programs enabled restaurants to keep operating and “keep staff” during the economic turmoil caused by the shelter-in-place order. The restaurants reported that Family Meal “kept us afloat” and “kept our doors open,” and they “would have shut down” without the program. When reflecting on tumultuous COVID-19 times, one restaurant shared:

“It [Family Meal] was definitely a lifesaver for us. I do not think we would have made it through COVID ... it was very difficult. Without the Family Meal program, I do not think we would be in business.”

The shelter-in-place order forced restaurants to stop indoor dining, leading to significant revenue losses and threatening their ability to stay in business or retain staff. **Family Meal utilized pandemic funds to address community needs and bolster the economic resilience of local restaurants.**



KEY LEARNING 2: The positive economic impact of Family Meal declined over time.

Figure 4 on page 32 shows the number of meals each restaurant prepared between June 2023 and December 2024. The blue triangles indicate the restaurant locations. The size of the triangle corresponds to the number of meals prepared; the larger the triangle, the greater the number of meals the restaurant made for Family Meal. The map illustrates the variation in the number of meal assignments restaurants received for the program.

Initially, the restaurants received steady meal delivery assignments, which allowed some to maintain their staff and manage supply orders. However, “over the last year,” the meal delivery assignments became “sporadic” and “more infrequent.”

The partners discussed how “we might deliver for a couple of weeks in a row, and then we might go three or four weeks without making any deliveries,” or only receive meal delivery assignments “a couple

As funding for food programs decreased, the number of meals the program could subsidize fell, reducing the number of meals the restaurants prepared.

of times a month.” As COVID-19 funding for food programs decreased, the number of meals the program could subsidize fell, reducing the number of meals the restaurants prepared. As the volume of meal deliveries declined, Family Meal was “not consistent enough to really have an economic impact” or contribute meaningfully to the restaurants’ earnings.

Family Meal set a goal to increase the number of restaurant partners from 16 to 20 by October 2024, but did not achieve this goal. However, given that Family Meal strives to provide a source of revenue for the restaurant partners, and the economic impact declined over time, not expanding the number of restaurant partners was in the program’s best interest. **Family Meal should revisit increasing the number of restaurant partners when sufficient funds are secured to support the program’s growth.**

All the restaurant partners are “grateful” for the opportunity to be part of the program and committed to its longevity, both for the economic support and to help the community, as captured by the following quote:

“There is a huge need in the community. I hope that as the program continues, and Clay continues to find additional funding, it will become more frequent and consistent in the amount of meals per week.”

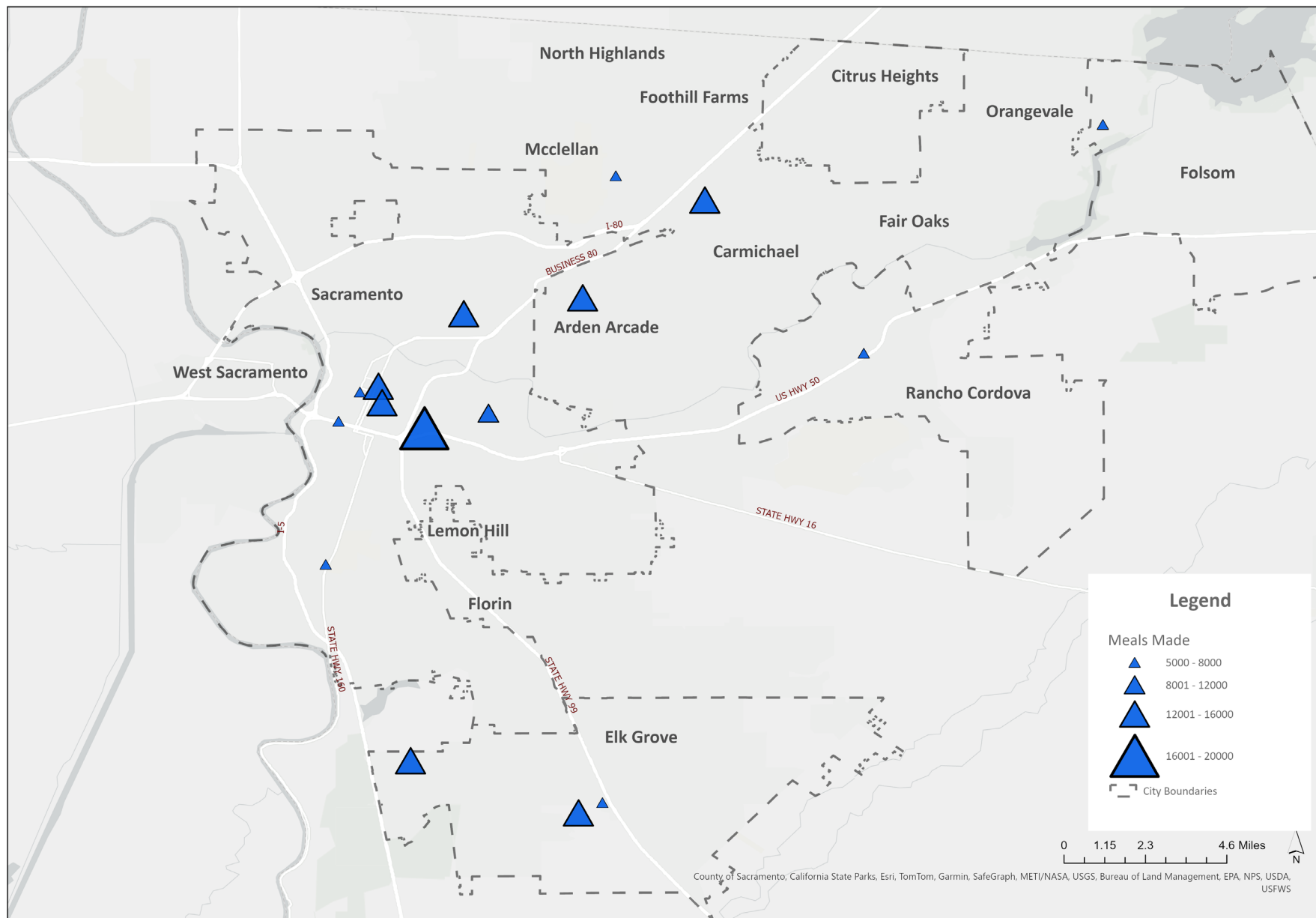
Restaurants joined the program for financial well-being and to support their communities. For all the restaurant partners, Family Meal was an “opportunity” to “keep our businesses going,” while also “getting to help others.” **All the restaurants emphasized community service as a motivation for participating in the program.** For example, when asked why they joined, a restaurant owner responded,

“When you see a need and have been blessed for so long, you have to help others ... you see so many people who do not have. You see kids who do not have. You see seniors who do not have. Families who do not have, and so you want to help. You just want to help.”

Restaurants’ commitment to assisting the community was one reason they continued the program, even when it encountered economic challenges.

All the restaurant partners are “grateful” for the opportunity to be part of the program and committed to its longevity, both for the economic support and to help the community.

Figure 4
Number of Meals Made by Restaurant Location, June 2023 - December 2024





KEY LEARNING 3: Family Meal increased the visibility of the restaurants and ushered

in new business opportunities. One restaurant owner shared that participating in the program had given them a “higher level of visibility throughout the city,” and “allowed folks to see who we are and what we do.” When asked about the benefits of participating in the program, a few others relayed that “it led to other business opportunities” with the CBOs who participate in the program and with other entities familiar with it. **Family Meal gives restaurants an outlet for free advertising and promotion, while increasing food access.** Although the financial benefits were minimal in the past year, several restaurants identified other benefits from participating in Family Meal, such as visibility, recognition for their local business, and alignment with personal values.



Photo: Generational Global Gardens



KEY LEARNING 4: The restaurants incorporated Family Meal preparation into their operation in several ways.

Some included Family Meal preparation in their daily operations. For instance, one partner noted that when the program was “consistent,” they “just built [meal preparation] into staff’s daily job requirements.” Some restaurants implemented Family Meal preparation during “slower hours” or added an extra hour or two to a five or six-hour restaurant shift. A few restaurants did not integrate Family Meal into daily operations and instead chose to establish a schedule “to focus on Family Meal only.” Like meal preparation, the restaurants managed food sourcing differently.

Four restaurants established business relationships with a “local farm” for seasonal and fresh produce. One restaurant purchased food from a locally owned grocery store, and others discussed procuring food from “Produce Express” and “Restaurant Depot.” A few restaurants mentioned that the high “price point” hindered sourcing food locally.

* Recommendations *



Family Meal launched at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as an economic lifeline for restaurants, while addressing food insecurity. Family Meal emerged from the pandemic as a culturally responsive partnership between 16 restaurants (81% owned by people of color) and 18 CBOs. **From June 2023 to December 2024, the Family Meal network delivered over 169,000 meals to racially and culturally diverse individuals and families in Sacramento County.**

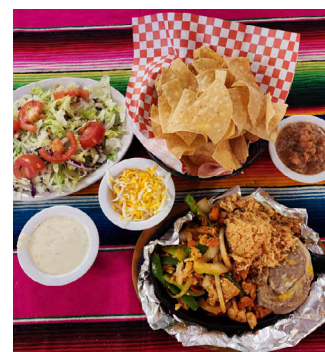
This evaluation revealed that Family Meal not only increased access to healthy food for those in need but also reduced household stress and enabled families to spend more quality time together. For the CBOs, incorporating Family Meal into their programs did not require increased staffing or operational adjustments, and it was a way to demonstrate a deep level of care for the individuals they serve. The restaurant partners reported that they were able to endure the financial hardships caused by COVID-19 due to the program. The restaurant partners continued with the program despite the reduced economic benefit because it increased their visibility and benefited the community. While there are many value-added benefits for meal recipients and program partners, the evaluation also identified opportunities to adjust and build on the program's assets.

This evaluation revealed that Family Meal not only increased access to healthy food for those in need but also reduced household stress and enabled families to spend more quality time together.

The following recommendations are based on insights from the partners interviewed and the key learnings presented in this report.

-  **Convene the CBOs and restaurant partners biannually or annually.** Many partners are unaware of which CBOs and restaurants participate in Family Meal and are interested in convening. The meetings can serve as a dedicated space for partners to build and strengthen relationships; share resources, knowledge, and expertise; discuss their program experiences and best practices; and strategize for program improvement and growth. One partner shared, “It would be really great if all the partners were brought together to talk shop and share strategies or ask questions for clarity.” Cross-partner engagement and coordination will enhance the program's growth, success, and long-term relevance.
-  **Increase the frequency of communication.** Establish consistent and open communication channels among the program administrator, restaurants, and CBO partners to enhance program responsiveness, flexibility, and adaptability. These channels could include quarterly or biannual check-ins, drop-in office hours, or automated appointment scheduling. CBOs expressed interest in discussing shifts in their clients' demographics, dietary needs, or troubleshooting challenges. Some restaurant partners desire greater transparency regarding program funding and meal assignment schedules so they can plan and adjust accordingly. Regular communication with program partners will improve coordination and ensure the program responds to and aligns with changing community needs and funding cycles.

- * Implement a quality control system.** To uphold high service standards and ensure equitable experiences across distribution sites, the program should establish a quality control system focused on compliance with meal portion size, menu, allergen labeling, and packaging requirements. While most CBO partners praised the quality of the meals, there were instances where smaller portions or the absence of a menu and allergen labeling impacted distribution. Partners reported that the packaging was inconsistent and sometimes hindered storing the meals in a warmer or refrigerator before distribution. A quality control system will reinforce program requirements to enhance restaurant partner accountability, supporting reliability and consistency for the CBOs.
- * Add a program advisor.** To ensure that restaurant and CBO partnerships align geographically and culturally with Sacramento's diverse communities and to support the program administrator, Family Meal should create a role for a program advisor. Currently, the program administrator manages most of the program tasks. Several partners emphasized the need for someone with local expertise and strong connections to the communities served to share the responsibility for program decision-making and implementation. This role would provide localized insight to identify the restaurants and CBOs best suited to meet the unique needs of different neighborhoods and assist the program administrator with the daily implementation of Family Meal, thereby enhancing efficiency and transparency.
- * Provide food safety training for CBOs.** While Family Meal coordinates meal delivery to align with program delivery for same-day distribution, delays in meal delivery may occur. Training the CBOs in basic food safety principles (e.g., time/temperature control) will guarantee that meals are handled correctly to prevent foodborne illness. This recommendation is precautionary and based on best practices from other food distribution programs. Family Meal has not received reports of individuals contracting foodborne diseases from the meal kits.
- * Offer CBOs the option to select menus.** While the meals accommodate most recipients' dietary and cultural preferences, there is an opportunity for stronger nutritional and cultural representation. Providing greater menu planning flexibility will better address a diverse clientele's nutritional and cultural needs. Some CBOs expressed a willingness and desire to choose menus for clients, whose dietary or cultural needs are unmet by Family Meal. This approach can enhance the program's nutritional and cultural relevance, allow restaurant partners to provide a variety of cuisines, and expand exposure to diverse dishes while ensuring the meals nourish and honor cultural food traditions.



*** Improve the consistency of meal kit assignments.** Unpredictable meal delivery schedules make it difficult for restaurant partners to incorporate Family Meal into their business operations. To improve operational efficiency and program continuity, the program should establish a more reliable and predictable schedule of assignments for restaurant partners. Regular scheduling would help restaurants plan staff time, coordinate meal preparation, and manage supply procurement. Costs may also rise for restaurants that are hesitant to buy in bulk at discounted rates due to uncertainty about when the next meal kit assignment will occur. Greater consistency would enable restaurant partners to better manage operations and expenses related to Family Meal.

*** Consider a 50% / 50% payment schedule.** Most restaurants supported allowing restaurants to receive a portion of their payment upfront to cover supply costs. Specifically, receiving 50% of their payment when they receive a meal assignment, instead of getting full payment 30 to 45 days after delivery, would alleviate the financial burden for small and newly established restaurants. Partners who endorsed this model understood the pressure that front-loaded costs can place on a small business. However, a few partners opposed this option and expressed concerns about its feasibility and the financial stress it might put on the program administrator.

*** Develop a robust and strategic marketing plan.**

The program should create a comprehensive strategic marketing plan to increase visibility, attract funding, and elevate its partners. This plan should aim to raise public awareness about Family Meal as a vital community resource while highlighting the program's impact to potential funders. Several partners emphasized the importance of enhancing visibility to ensure that “people see that Family Meal is still going on to help people’s food insecurity and hunger or economic insecurity,” stressing that ongoing awareness can directly support sustainability through increased funding. Partners suggested leveraging meals as a promotional tool within a broader marketing strategy. Sharing weekly menus in advance or disclosing which restaurant partner is preparing the meal kits can help CBOs promote upcoming distributions more effectively. One suggestion is to host a high-profile community event, such as a Tower Bridge dinner, to showcase the program, the chefs and restaurants, and the CBOs involved, while generating revenue through ticket sales and donations. A strategic marketing approach incorporating community events, storytelling, and promotion can honor Family Meal partners, highlight program impact, and create additional funding opportunities.



Images: Canon restaurant and Family Meal

-  **Build and establish a data management system.** A data management system provides a structured way to enter, edit, and query program data. Including a user-friendly data entry form will improve the accuracy (meal kits = meals), consistency (partner naming conventions), and completeness (contact information) of the data to support analysis and reporting. This system will help accurately evaluate the program's effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions about resource allocation and program strategies. Finally, having accessible data will enable the development of a program narrative to effectively communicate and showcase the program's impact for marketing, grant proposals, and fundraising efforts.
-  **Coordinate culturally tailored meals in advance of delivery.** Offer an option for CBOs to plan culturally relevant meals two to four weeks in advance of delivery, to give them time to organize events and outreach to specific groups during the gap between scheduling and delivery. Also, provide an option for CBOs to receive a variety of meals. For example, 10% to 15% of the meals include a different protein or are meat-free if a meal kit contains a pork dish. Family Meal mostly met the cultural, religious, and dietary needs of recipients, but not entirely. Coordinating culturally tailored meals will help ensure that everyone sees their culture reflected in the meals they receive.

The recommendations are intended to inform adjustments that enhance Family Meal's efficiency, impact, and reach. Family Meal is a model for forming partnerships and utilizing existing infrastructure to address urgent needs while demonstrating care for the people served. A key strength of the program is its ability to cater to racially and culturally diverse people with diverse needs and living situations. However, the persistent gap between food demand and available resources underscores the need for continued investment in programs like Family Meal to ensure lasting impact.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Program History

The Emergency Phase: March 2020 – July 2022

The Family Meal emergency phase began in March 2020 with the WHO's pandemic declaration and ended in July 2022. The world grappled with a new deadly virus that disrupted people's daily routines. COVID-19 variants (e.g., Omicron) and subvariants (Omicron BA.4 and BA.5) emerged, exacerbating the severity and spread of the virus. To protect community health, governments implemented COVID-19 safety measures such as mandatory mask mandates and the complete shutdown of most businesses. These measures relaxed when transmission rates declined (e.g., 50% occupancy for indoor dining) and were then reinstated when virus rates rose again. **A lack of stability characterized the emergency phase, leading to the launch, temporary pause, and relaunch of Family Meal.**

Shortly before California's COVID-19 stay-at-home order was issued, the owners of Canon and Mulvaney's B&L restaurants discussed ways to generate income as their businesses slowed because "people stopped eating out for fear of catching the virus." The idea for Family Meal emerged from conversations focused on "Can we get paid to make food for anyone?" and "Who is that anyone?" The restaurant owners identified the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) as the entity that might pay for restaurant-prepared meals for delivery to students and their families.

A small coalition of **independent restaurant owners (e.g., Binchoyaki, Camden Spit & Larder, Mulvaney's B&L, and Woodlake Tavern), along with SCUSD Nutrition Services**

staff and restaurant colleagues, met to discuss the idea that, "We [restaurants] have all these people who will be out of work, and we have freezers full of food. We can make food for the kids and sell it to the school." SCUSD staff responded that they also had freezers full of food and that while they had funds to feed the kids, they did not have funds to feed adults. The conversation then shifted to using school sites for distributing free food to families; SCUSD would provide food for children under 18, while the restaurants would supply meals for the adults. **The outcome of that meeting was the Family Meal program framework**, which outlined meal content (i.e., protein, starch, and vegetable) and portion sizes, in addition to a decision to move forward with prepared, ready-to-eat meals for food safety reasons.

The California stay-at-home order was issued three days after that meeting, which prompted indoor dining to close thus **creating an urgency to launch Family Meal**. The founders of Family Meal dedicated all their energy to building the program by developing trial meals, navigating meal delivery

"We [restaurants] have all these people who will be out of work, and we have freezers full of food. We can make food for the kids and sell it to the school."

logistics, raising awareness about the program, and fundraising. For the program's founders, it was a hectic time when “everything was happening all at once” to get Family Meal operational. When reflecting on this period, the Family Meal founder said:

“We were desperate, we were moving at the speed of crises ... We were just moving as quickly as possible towards the outcome that we were hoping for, which was, can we get money in the door to survive, and at the same time, what was the most impactful thing we could do with our resources of food and our talent, which was cooking.”

The tireless effort paid off. In April 2020, two weeks after the shutdown order was issued, **Family Meal received funding** from the City of Sacramento to provide meals for individuals and families living in affordable housing. This grant was the “seed” that led the Family Meal founders to develop a “meal kit,” which included four dinner-sized meals, ensuring every household member received a meal. From that point on, **meal kits became integral to the program model.**

Family Meal “started because there was an emergency,” and although the restaurant founders were responding to that emergency,” they were “hopeful that their businesses would open back up soon.” Family Meal operated for about eight weeks before **the founders paused the program and redirected their efforts** to full-time participation in the newly formed **California Great Plates Delivered program.** The founders chose this path because Great Plates was “at the forefront” for emergency food delivery, and long-term funding for Family Meal was uncertain.

California Great Plates Delivered (April 2020 – June 2021)

Family Meal inspired California's Great Plates Delivered program (Great Plates), which provided restaurant-prepared meals to older adults at high-risk of contracting COVID-19. Great Plates launched in April 2020 with funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services oversaw the program, while city and county governments managed it locally.

City of Sacramento staff recruited restaurant partners, enrolled meal participants, and contracted with Matt Burgess, co-owner of Burgess Brothers Catering, and chefs Brad Cecchi and Patrick Mulvaney, founders of Family Meal, to advise and mentor the Great Plates restaurant partners. The Great Plates program included meal kits, like Family Meal; however, the Great Plates meal kits contained three meals instead of four: breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The State of California ended the **Great Plates program once COVID-19 vaccines became widely available and governments lifted pandemic restrictions.** In Sacramento, the program ended in June 2021. Great Plates provided economic security and valuable experience in refining meal kit preparation for the restaurants that participated in the relaunch of Family Meal.

Sacramento County COVID-19 Collaborative (Fall 2020 – May 2022)

In the fall of 2020, staff from the Sierra Health Foundation approached Clay Nutting, the Family Meal Program Administrator, about joining the Sacramento County COVID-19 Collaborative (Collab). The Collab was a partnership between the Sacramento County Public Health Department, The Center at Sierra Health Foundation, and several community-based organizations. Collab offered essential resources, including food, financial assistance, and mental health services, to vulnerable and quarantined community members. The partnership focused on reaching communities of color disproportionately affected by COVID-19, including Latinx, Hispanic, Black, Southeast Asian, Asian, and Pacific Islander communities.

Upon learning from the Collab that there was a “need for emergency-based food resources we **[the Family Meal founders] revived Family Meal** to address those needs.” Through a proposal request and assistance from Burgess Brothers, Family Meal **built new partnerships with restaurants owned by people of color**, whose cuisine reflected the cultural food traditions of the individuals receiving the meals. While Collab funding for Family Meal concluded in May 2022, the program administrator secured additional funding to continue the program into the community recovery phase.

The Community Recovery Phase: June 2022 – February 2023

The community recovery phase was characterized by a general transition towards normalcy following an unsettling and disorienting global pandemic. During this time, “vaccinations were happening, so folks were a little less vulnerable, but there was a business disruption, there was still a disruption in everyday life.”

In the community recovery phase, people gradually started to engage in previously restricted activities (e.g., sharing space with others in restaurants, performing arts centers, or large public venues). Community-based organizations shifted from providing emergency services to offering consistent programming, and small business owners sought stability to regain their financial footing. **Family**

Meal evolved in response to this context. Family Meal shifted from delivering “emergency food” to individual homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19, moving toward a “**community-based hub model,**” which included food lockers, schools, and community centers.

When state-funded COVID-19 emergency food programs ended, at the request of Paratransit, a social service transportation agency in Sacramento County, **Family Meal continued providing meals to older adults** who “self-identified as still in desperate need” of resources. The Meals on Wheels program

The community recovery phase was characterized by a general transition towards normalcy following an unsettling and disorienting global pandemic.

was at full capacity, with a waiting list, leaving the older adults uncertain about obtaining enough food without financial assistance. The Family Meal program administrator approached the County of Sacramento for funding because the older adults who needed food resided in their jurisdiction, and the program's financial resources were limited.

The Family Meal program administrator successfully pitched the community hub “pilot project” model to the County for funding, which included meal delivery to older adults referred through paratransit to the program. The model leveraged the trust and relationships that CBOs built with residents to efficiently distribute meals throughout Sacramento County, as explained by the program administrator:

“Rather than identifying individuals in need, we worked through community-based organizations to distribute the food to the people they know are in the highest need.”

In this iteration of the program, the “core Family Meal restaurant partners” were retained, rather than recruiting new restaurants, as “we wanted to focus less on getting people up to speed on how to run the program and more on hitting the ground running with this new model or working through community hubs.”

The restaurant partners tapped into their network and followed recommendations from the County Board of Supervisors to **recruit CBOs trusted by residents in “high need” areas**. Once the program was operational, the program administrator continued to refine the logistical aspects of the community hub model by developing “inputs” to pair restaurants with community-based organizations, and to inform the number of meal kits delivered each month, ensuring the program's sustainability throughout the grant period. **The community hub model proved successful**, and the program administrator sought funding to extend the program into the sustaining phase.

The Family Meal **emergency and community recovery phases lasted for approximately three years**. During that time, **the program model shifted to accommodate a transition from providing meals to safeguard the community's health to focusing on meal provision to increase access to healthy food**. Family Meal program components that emerged during the emergency and community recovery phases are as follows:

Emergency Phase: March 2020 – July 2022

- A program framework that outlined meal content and portion sizes
- The development of a meal kit that included four prepared, ready-to-eat meals
- Standard operating procedures for meal production and packaging
- Established partnerships with racially and culturally diverse restaurants

Community Recovery Phase: June 2022 – July 2023

- A network of CBOs to distribute meals
- A system to match restaurants with community organizations
- A method for establishing a meal preparation and delivery schedule

Sustaining Phase: March 2023 – December 2024

This phase focused on building a scalable and replicable program with the flexibility to adapt to various funding sources and strengthening collaboration with local restaurant partners to address food security, nutrition, and food access. This phase was primarily supported by funding from the California Department of Housing and Community Development. The first evaluation of the program occurred during this phase, and the lessons learned will guide future iterations and improvements of the Family Meal program.

Appendix B: Partner Compendium

Table 1 | Family Meal Restaurant Partners

Name	Type
 BINCHOYAKI IZAKAYA DINING	Binchoyaki is a Japanese-style barbecue restaurant in Sacramento specializing in sumiyaki—grilling over traditional binchotan charcoal. Known for its flavorful yakitori and casual vibe, Binchoyaki brings bold, smoky dishes to life with every skewer. Founded by Le Cordon Bleu–trained chefs, Binchoyaki blends deep culinary experience with a love for community, offering a welcoming space where great food and good company come together.
 BURGESS BROTHERS EST 1850 Coloma, CA	Burgess is a family-founded company rooted in over 170 years of culinary tradition, service, and innovation. The Burgess Brothers offer food products for hospitality, food service, and retail—ranging from sauces and baking mixes to meats, beverages, and PPE. With deep roots in California since 1849, their legacy blends food, public service, and education to create memorable experiences for all.
 <i>Cafe</i> <i>Elk Grove</i> @DISTRICT56	Cafe Elk Grove is a locally rooted eatery known for fresh, flavorful meals and a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Proudly serving the Sacramento community, the café goes beyond the plate through meaningful outreach—most notably, a partnership with Family Meals of Sacramento, providing nutritious meals to families in need.
 CANON EAST SAC. BETTER CALIF. W BETTER	Canon is a Michelin-rated restaurant known for its strong community ties. During the pandemic, Canon helped launch an initiative that partnered with independent restaurants to address food insecurity in the region. The restaurant is also dedicated to supporting local farms and agriculture, embracing the Farm to Fork philosophy that defines the area's culinary spirit.

CASA TULUM

Casa Tulum was a beloved Mexican restaurant in Sacramento known for its vibrant flavors and authentic Yucatecan cuisine. The restaurant closed its doors in 2023 and transitioned to catering services.



Colo's Soul Food is a veteran-owned restaurant in Sacramento serving soulful, seafood-inspired comfort food. Known for dishes like Chicken n Waffle Brunch and Garlic Noodle Bowls, Colo's blends classic flavors with a fresh twist in an inclusive, welcoming space. Colo's closed as of August 2025.



Costa Vida is a fresh, coastal-inspired restaurant that brings vibrant flavors and made-from-scratch meals to communities across the U.S. Opened in 2003, Costa Vida has grown through strong franchise leadership and a commitment to guest experience with over 90 locations.



Drewski's was founded in 2011 and operates a brick-and-mortar location along with four mobile kitchens. Drewski's offers four unique concepts: barbeque, authentic Hispanic cuisine, hand-breaded fried chicken, and a classic diner menu at their main location. Drewski's partners with nonprofits like Meals on Wheels Sacramento, Agency on Aging, and Yolo Healthy Aging Alliance to serve age-appropriate meals to seniors across the region.



Generational Global Gardens (G3) is a family-owned business serving farm-to-fork comfort foods since 2018. Inspired by generations of international recipes and a grandmother's garden, G3 blends culture, flavor, and nutrition in every bite. They focus on healing foods that nourish the mind, body, and spirit—crafting meals with superfoods and culturally diverse ingredients tailored to support health and well-being.



Madar specializes in Afghan fusion street food.



Mayahuel offers a vibrant experience that blends art, culture, and the rich culinary traditions of Mexico. From the bold murals of Gabriel Romo to small-batch Mezcales and handcrafted cocktails, every visit is a sensory journey. Owner Ernesto Delgado brings the flavors of his mother's recipes to life, combining fresh, local ingredients with authentic Mexican heritage. At Mayahuel, tradition meets creativity—delivering a farm-to-fork experience that feels like a quick escape to Mexico.



Mulvaney's B&L is a beloved Sacramento gem housed in a restored 1893 firehouse, serving seasonal, hand-crafted New American cuisine. Owners Patrick and Bobbin Mulvaney are longtime champions of the region's growers, winemakers, and producers, with a deep commitment to sustainability and community. The menu changes daily to reflect what is fresh and local.



Netillo's Takos is a fast-casual Mexican restaurant founded by two siblings in 2016 with a passion for fresh, authentic flavor. Formerly known as Flakos Takos, Netillo's is known for its quick service, welcoming atmosphere, and bold menu featuring burritos, tortas, quesadillas, and more—all made with high-quality, fresh ingredients.



TLC Catering has served the Greater Sacramento area since 2001, known for delivering delicious, thoughtfully prepared meals with attentive, personalized service. With a strong commitment to inclusivity, TLC Catering offers flavorful options for vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, and allergy-sensitive guests.



Todo Un Poco is an Italian and Mexican casual dining restaurant in the city of Elk Grove, operating since 1998. More than a simple restaurant serving great food, the restaurant is also a community-focused establishment that champions and advocates for the reduction of food waste, the arts, and the diversity of the Elk Grove Community.



Xochimilco is a second-generation, family-owned restaurant serving authentic Mexican cuisine since 1963. Founded by Salvador and Francis Leyva, Xochimilco offers flavorful dishes like fajitas, burritos, tacos, soups, and salads. They also provide custom catering and private party services tailored to your needs, continuing a proud tradition of family and flavor.

Table 2 | Family Meal Community-Based Organization Partners

Name	Type
	Empowering Possibilities Unlimited (EPU) has been serving K-8 schools in the greater Sacramento area since 1994. EPU provides high-quality before and after school programs to assist working families. In EUP programs, students are offered a meal and additional snacks as well as allocated time for structured, recreational activities. EUP strives to deliver a safe and fun environment for our students to fulfill their academic, social, and emotional needs.
	The Health Education Council strives towards a vision of improving the health of entire communities by addressing the social drivers of health in historically under-served neighborhoods. The Health Education Council believes that improving the health of those living in historically under-served neighborhoods is essential to a community's overall health strategy.
	Joey's Food Locker, located on the campus of Natomas High School, serves the Natomas community by providing grocery bags every Thursday from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. for families and individuals in need.
	La Familia Counseling Center serves Sacramento's diverse families by providing multicultural counseling, support, and outreach programs aimed at empowering at-risk youth and families to overcome adversity and succeed. La Familia is rooted in values like accountability, mutual respect, diversity, caring, compassion, family, empowerment, innovation, and enthusiasm, and is dedicated to building strong partnerships and fostering community well-being through inclusive, strength-based services that uplift and inspire lasting positive change.



Liberty Towers Church is a welcoming faith community in Sacramento committed to transforming lives through Jesus. Embracing the philosophy "Belong before you believe," the church invites people from all walks of life to explore faith at their own pace in a supportive environment. Dedicated to families, Liberty Towers partners with parents to nurture children from birth through high school in a safe, engaging space focused on faith and character development.



Masjid Annur Islamic Center, established in 1982, serves Sacramento's Muslim community as a hub for worship, education, and social events. The center features a large prayer hall, multipurpose event space, a gym, and the full-time Al-Arqam Islamic School with over 500 students. Masjid Annur hosts daily and Friday prayers, Eid celebrations, tutoring, Sunday school, food drives, and provides marriage, funeral, and counseling services.



Masjid As-Sabur, a Sunni mosque in Sacramento, offers an inclusive and welcoming environment for worshippers of all backgrounds. The mosque prioritizes family-friendly spaces and provides ample parking, including spots for those with mobility needs. Masjid As-Sabur hosts five daily prayers and Jumu'ah services, serving as a spiritual and community hub for local Muslims.



The Mission Oaks Recreation and Park District (morpd.com) is currently celebrating its 50th year in operation of serving over 65,000 diverse residents in the Arden and Carmichael areas of Sacramento. We operate and manage 14 parks including two Community Centers, offering beautifully maintained playgrounds and open spaces, as well as recreation and enrichment programs for all ages. Mission Oaks prides itself in its ability to collaborate and partner with many local businesses to magnify the opportunities and services provided to the community.



Natomas Unified School District (NUSD) has exemplary staff preparing students for college and career. NUSD provides programs beginning in preschool, and all the way through high school and adult education. NUSD, Nutrition Services Department, partnered with Family Meal to distribute meals.



In 2011, the **Orangevale-Fair Oaks Food Bank** was born out of a simple yet powerful idea: neighbors helping neighbors. Along with the three staff members, the food bank operates with an amazing group of volunteers that help us serve our neighbors in Orangevale, Fair Oaks, Folsom, and Citrus Heights. We distribute food four times a week to an average of 90-95 families per distribution.



Rancho Cordova Food Locker, est. 2020 serves Rancho Cordova and the surrounding neighborhoods. The organization supports over 4,000 neighbors each month, with many families from Ukrainian, Afghan, and Russian immigrant communities. Rancho Cordova Food Locker provides food distribution and recovery programs focused on delivering fresh, nutritious food to families and individuals facing food insecurity. Partnering with local grocery stores and the Sacramento Food Bank network, they work to recover millions of pounds of good food annually to reduce hunger and waste.



Roberts Family Development Center (RFDC) has been a trusted community anchor in North Sacramento and Del Paso Heights since 2001, providing culturally rooted, family-centered services that uplift and empower. Our core programs include Education Services such as afterschool, Freedom Schools, and youth mentoring; the Black Child Legacy Campaign, which focuses on reducing disproportionate African American child deaths; and the African American Healing Network, which supports mental health and healing-centered care. Through these programs, RFDC supports children and families with academic, emotional, and community-driven resources that build resilience, leadership, and lifelong success. RFDC distributed meals in North Sacramento, at Foothill Ranch Middle School, and Martin Luther King Technology Academy.



Founded in 1896, **Robla School District** is a public K–6 district in North Sacramento serving approximately 2,000 students across five elementary schools and one preschool. The district reflects a vibrant mix of cultures, with 25 languages spoken and 35% of students identified as English language learners. In Robla, where nearly 95% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, the district's Food & Nutrition Services program plays a critical role in supporting food security. Each day, the district serves over 4,000 meals, with a focus on freshly prepared options to ensure all students are well-nourished and ready to learn. Family Meal partnered with Robla School District nutrition services to distribute meals at Bell Avenue Elementary School, Glenwood Elementary School, Robla Elementary School, and Taylor Street Elementary School.



Rose Family Creative Empowerment Center (RFCE) mission is to leverage the power of the arts and education to provide our children and families with the skills, tools, and opportunities to achieve and live productive and fulfilling lives. Founded in 2014, RFCE has continuously expanded and strengthened its work within South Sacramento.



Sacramento ACT is a multi-racial, multi-faith organization rooted in shared faith values, advocating for justice and equity across Sacramento County. Founded to empower everyday people, it represents over 56 congregations, schools, and neighborhood groups, serving 60,000 families. Sacramento ACT focuses on addressing historical discrimination and disinvestment in communities of color by driving equitable public policies. Grounded in congregation-based community organizing, it believes in the transformative power of people, institutions, and culture.



Sacramento City Unified School District, Central Kitchen's mission is to serve every student—regardless of income—with freshly prepared meals while at school. Starting in the 2022-2023 school year, Central Kitchen began providing scratch-made meals and continues to grow meal options for students. The Central Kitchen distributed Family Meals at A.M.Winn Public Waldorf School, Bowling Green Charter School, Father Keith B. Kenny Elementary School, Hollywood Park Elementary School, and Susan B. Anthony Elementary School.



The Sacramento Children's Home operates three Family Resource Centers. The Valley Hi Family Resource Center, established in 2004, is in South Sacramento. It serves families with children aged 0–18 by providing support services, including parenting workshops, housing assistance, child development resources, and connections to health and basic needs programs. The center focuses on building strong, resilient families by meeting them where they are and helping them access the tools they need to thrive.



Sacramento Youth Center, founded in 2019, is in the Del Paso Heights neighborhood of Sacramento. It was created by co-founders Adam and Raquel Shipp to provide transitional age youth with a welcoming space for quality mentoring and support beyond traditional after-school programs. Serving over 1,000 students, SYC offers a youth-driven environment where mentoring happens naturally—in activities like games or casual hangouts—helping young people grow into their best selves.

Appendix C: Methodology

Data collection for this evaluation centered on interviews with program partners and the program administrator. This approach enabled the evaluation team to gather comprehensive insights pertinent to the evaluation questions: (1) What is the Family Meal model?, (2) How is culturally responsive operationalized?, (3) How does Family Meal contribute to food security?, (4) What is the economic impact of the Family Meal program, and (5) What are Family Meal's strengths and opportunities?

To initiate data collection, the program administrator provided the evaluation team with a list of the Family Meal restaurant and CBO partners. The team created categories to classify the community organizations and restaurants. The evaluators categorized the CBOs by their type (e.g., school, church, food locker), their geographic location (e.g., north, or south Sacramento), and the duration they had been in the program. The evaluation team then categorized the restaurants based on the type of food they specialized in (e.g., Mexican, Japanese, Soul Food), their price point, and how long they had participated in the program. When selecting interview participants, the evaluation team reviewed the categories and chose partners with diverse characteristics to gather a range of perspectives.

The evaluation team developed the interview questions in partnership with the program administrator and The Center staff. The evaluation team conducted semi-structured, 60- to 90-minute interviews with 11 CBOs and nine restaurant partners in January, February, and March 2025. The interviewer completed post-interview summaries and shared them with the entire evaluation team to foster collective understanding. The evaluation team debriefed regularly during the three months when interviews took place to refine the interview questions and gather input on emerging insights. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy to create a written record of each conversation, supporting a multi-step thematic analysis.

The evaluation team conducted a preliminary review of the interview transcripts to gain a general understanding of the data. The evaluation team met to draft, reflect on, and then revise a series of codes and a code sheet to guide the categorization of information in the transcripts. The code scheme included 17 parent codes, corresponding to broad categories based on the evaluation questions (e.g., food insecurity, program model), and several child or subcodes to facilitate a deductive analysis of the data, working from a general to a more specific level of understanding. Two members of the evaluation team coded the transcripts. The themes and sub-themes generated through this multi-step analysis illuminated the interconnectedness of the topics discussed and surfaced key learnings.

Limitations

The evaluation report presents the experiences and opinions of those interviewed and may not reflect the views of individuals not included in the evaluation. Although the evaluation team took steps to minimize bias during the planning, design, and data collection phases, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations.

Some interviewees may not recall their Family Meal experience accurately or might conflate it with another program, such as Great Plates, leading to recall bias. This is especially likely for those involved in the program since March 2020 or those who participated for only a brief time in the past. Furthermore, because Family Meal started during a pandemic that significantly altered daily routines, it may be difficult for some interviewees to distinguish and remember program details from such a chaotic period.

Additionally, due to the time allocated for evaluation, there was insufficient time to assess the data literacy of program partners and then design and implement a data collection system to collect primary, quantitative data. The evaluation timeline also limited the evaluation team's ability to build trusting relationships with community organization partners to discuss the feasibility and coordination of incorporating the voices of those who received the meals into the evaluation. Consequently, the perspective of the CBO partners, rather than that of the meal recipients, informed the benefits of Family Meal and the degree to which the meals met the cultural, religious, and dietary needs of the individuals who received them.

