

Invite Your Member of Congress to Visit a Child Nutrition Program

The Child Nutrition Programs benefit millions of low-income children each day, providing healthy food both in and out of school. These programs are public policy at its best, and that is why it is critically important for advocates to invite Members of Congress, as well as state and local elected officials, to visit Child Nutrition Program sites. Seeing children engaged in activities and eating nutritious meals can move an elected official to become a champion for strengthening the programs.

How do I organize a visit? It's as easy as ABC!

Find the Perfect Site

It is important to select a site in a location that is easily accessible for your Member of Congress and the media. Ideally, the child care, school, afterschool and summer site should provide high quality care and educational and enrichment services as well as healthy meals and snacks.

As you plan your event, please consider the following:

- Visit the site ahead of time – think about the picture your visitors will see. Make sure the site promotes your programmatic priorities. For example, avoid sites that have a lot of vending machines or ads for junk food. You can enhance the site with banners, posters, or children's artwork.
- Check the menu ahead of time to ensure that the program will be serving healthy, child-friendly food that will be consumed enthusiastically during the visit.
- Pick a time and day for the visit when you know participation will be high. If Mondays typically have low participation, schedule your visit for later in the week. Also, try to schedule the visit earlier in the day.
- Television and newspaper reporters often have early afternoon deadlines for the evening news and thus prefer mornings.
- Schedule the visit so that your elected official and the media are present **during the meal service**. (Tip: In your press release, list the times the children will be eating.)

Prepare for the Visit

The key to a successful site visit is to plan ahead so the event is well-organized and runs smoothly.

- Develop or update your media contact list a few weeks before the event. Include any local media that are likely to attend, state-wide media that may report on the event even without attending, and reporters from your state's major papers who are based in Washington, DC.
- Create a media advisory and a press release for the event. FRAC can help!
- Create a packet of background materials for your elected official. The packet should contain your press release, relevant fact sheets, outreach materials, organizations participating in the event, and any other helpful information.
- Create a list of assignments so that everyone knows their responsibilities the day of the event, including a staff member to take pictures at the event. Before the event, discuss the images you want to capture.
- Prepare the children in advance. Tell them about the visit and what they should expect that day. If possible, allow them to be involved in planning the event. For example, the children can draw pictures and decorate the site with their artwork.
- Distribute parental photo release forms before the visit. The forms should state that parents give permission for reporters to take photographs or video of their children during the visit. FRAC can provide a sample form. Those children without parental release forms should be out of camera range during the visit.

Craft Your Message

Your elected official may not have a lot of time to spend at the site so you want to have a succinct message to convey during the visit.

- Research what issues are priorities for your Member of Congress. For example, if he or she is particularly interested in decreasing juvenile crime, stress how the children are safe and secure in a supervised environment while their parents are at work. If the office is interested in curbing childhood obesity, focus on the nutrition quality of the meals and the opportunities the site provides for physical activity.
- Regardless of the specific approach you take, your main messages should be:
Child nutrition programs provide critical nutritional support to low-income children, while also providing educational enrichment, physical activity, and other child development opportunities. Unfortunately, only a small portion of eligible children (use national or state data) participate due to a variety of barriers. Please work with us to strengthen and protect all of the federal child nutrition programs.

Work with the Media

To maximize the impact of the site visit, you want to get as much media attention as possible.

- Alert the media as early as possible, preferably at least three days in advance of the visit. If your city is served by a news wire service, make sure that your event is listed in the daybook. Contact community newspapers, local television network affiliates, cable access channels and radio stations—they are likely to cover the visit.
- Assemble media kits for reporters. The kit should include your press release, fact sheets, and brochures. List the names of staff contacts and other organizations involved in the event, along with contact information.
- Work closely with congressional press staff to coordinate your media kits, press releases, materials, and quotes. Also, determine how much time the Member of Congress will have at the site and provide a timeline for the event so that staff will know what to expect.
- In advance, identify a few parents that are comfortable with speaking to reporters about the positive impact the program has had on their families. This will ensure that reporters respect the privacy of the children and families at the site.

Create the Perfect Photo Op

During the site visit, make sure to capture plenty of shots of your Member of Congress engaging with the children and other guests.

- Ask your elected official if he or she would like to help serve meals to the children.
- Make a special chef hat or apron for your guest to wear.
- Encourage your guest to sit and talk with the children while they eat.
- Have the children present their guest with something they made such as a banner or a collection of their artwork.

Organize a Stakeholder Meeting

After your elected official has had a chance to see the site in action, create an opportunity for him or her to meet with key stakeholders privately to discuss how to strengthen and protect the Child Nutrition Programs. Stakeholders could include anti-hunger advocates, summer food sponsors, community leaders, parents, educators, and anyone else invested in improving and expanding child nutrition programs. (**Note:** The media should not be present for this part of the event.)

Follow Up

After the event is over, remember to follow up with your elected official.

- Contact legislative staff to answer any questions and offer opportunities for follow-up activities, such as writing an article for a newsletter to constituents.
- Share any press coverage you receive with your elected official and publicize the event to your network.
- Place photos and articles about the visit on your webpage and in your newsletter.
- Use social media to publicize the event and thank your elected official for attending.

For more information...

- 📧 Please let us know how we can help you to prepare for a site visit or let us know about a site visit you are planning so we can share with others.
- 📧 *Questions?* Contact Etienne Melcher, Senior Legislative and Public Affairs Associate, emelcher@frac.org, 202-986-2200 x3012.