CACFP Virtual Monitoring

COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES
Deliberative Forum

WHAT IS A DELIBERATIVE FORUM?

In mid-March, CACFP Roundtable convened the Child and Adult Care (CACFP) community, to discuss monitoring in the CACFP. The purpose was to provide an opportunity for the community to explore the practical application, the policies and procedures, and the challenges and benefits of remote monitoring which was allowed by the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS) during the public health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the meeting, the CACFP Roundtable released an issue brief to assist the community in thoughtful deliberation regarding remote monitoring policies and practices. The brief and deliberative forum were not reflective of state agencies’ annual review remote processes. The issue brief, deliberative forum, one-pager, and this paper focus on sponsors monitoring their centers and/or family child care homes and what those policies, procedures, and practices reflect.

WHO JOINED US?

- 104 attendees across the CACFP community
- At risk afterschool, adult day care, child care centers, head start, sponsors of centers and family child care homes, advocates, and state agencies
- Several states were represented such as Kansas, Texas, and Florida, with the majority from California

WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW?

The virtual meeting was two hours long and took place on March 16, 2023. Individuals raised their hands, spoke on camera, and participated in the chat.

WHAT DID WE DISCUSS?

The deliberation revolved around three options for monitoring practices (find details of the options):

1. All remote monitoring practices policies
2. Hybrid monitoring policies
3. All in-person required monitoring policies

We talked about lived experiences, approaches, and the benefits or drawbacks of the options.
Recommendations

Based on community feedback and the discussions during the remote monitoring deliberative forum, the CACFP Roundtable recommends that USDA FNS and state agencies consider the varied experiences and operations of the CACFP. Allow reasonable flexibility for monitoring, which enhances equity, program efficiency, and effectiveness.

A HYBRID APPROACH

Some ideas discussed during the deliberative forum include:

- **Adjusting the 30-day and preapproval visits by allowing these to be virtual.**
- **One unannounced meal visit must be in person (onsite), plus the initial site visit. The additional two visits could be virtual if there are no significant findings.**
- **Utilize the current model of averaging site visits (i.e., some providers might get two virtual and one onsite, and some might get one virtual and two onsite).**
- **Increase the required minimum monitoring if allowed to conduct them virtually. One in-person and three virtual. That allows for one per quarter year per site.**

Enabling flexibilities ensures program access, improves integrity, saves money, and makes the program work for the various agencies operating and monitoring the CACFP.
Virtual monitoring does not hinder program integrity, in fact, it strengthens it. There is more opportunity for extended and regular touchpoints.

The CACFP Roundtable appreciates USDA FNS guidance regarding ways to make a visit shorter by doing parts of the paperwork offsite. However, this does not alleviate the burden of CACFP sponsors traveling to a multitude of sites three times a year. Allowing monitoring flexibilities for the number of in-person meal visits ensures the CACFP that can respond to the community that it is serving.

CACFP sponsors know their sites and their providers’ needs and put program integrity at the forefront of their policies and procedures. For example, the flexibilities during the pandemic enabled many sponsors to do all of the unannounced visits observing meals. They also prioritize access to meals served through the CACFP and flexibility with the number of in-person visits ensures this opportunity.

Many sponsors talked about how they were able to expand program access, improve technical assistance, and meet people “where they were.” If the sponsors felt some providers were having a difficult time keeping up with the program rules or having difficulty with technology, the sponsors would go on-site.

All participants agreed that connection and context is extremely important to program success. The majority of sponsors felt that connection was enhanced via the virtual visits. The monitors weren’t spending their time traveling and rushing through visits and instead could focus on the providers’ needs – not the clock. On the other hand, sponsors who do not travel large geographic distances or have fewer classrooms and sites to see, seemed to prefer being in person but noted that different programs and agencies have different needs. During the deliberation, some shared that there were programs that never did virtual monitoring because it didn’t make sense for their program, they were frustrated by the technology, or it was not a good fit because of staffing issues or being uncomfortable with not seeing a meal in person.
Common Themes

We have summarized throughout this document the common themes that arose during the discussion. They were captured verbally and through the chat box.

**EFFICIENCY & TIME**

Many sponsors of all types of programs shared that virtual/remote visits increased efficiency. One sponsor of child care centers stated they have 53 sites, each with two to eight classes; it is hard to get everywhere. However, virtual visits enabled them to see two to four classes at a time. Sponsors of family child care homes expressed that they could accomplish more visits in a day or week. They could see two lunch visits in one day because they didn’t have to drive from one site to another and the monitors could even eat lunch themselves! Several also expressed that it was more efficient and better for the family child care providers and their children to not have the disruptions of a person entering the home.

> Our county is very spread out. We are in San Louis Obispo. It [virtual] was good. It is an hour, maybe a little more, to get from one side of the county to the other. Doing virtual we could do it in ten minutes. It was more efficient in time.

— Sponsor of Family Child Care Homes

**INTEGRITY**

We discussed whether sponsors felt integrity was at risk with virtual monitoring. The majority of sponsors expressed integrity was stronger with virtual monitoring as it was easier to do follow up visits. Virtual monitoring provided more opportunities for technical assistance and customer service because the monitors weren’t spending so much time driving. Monitors shared that they could be more focused on the visit because they weren’t trying to wrap things up quickly to include driving time to get to the next site. Sponsors also stated that almost all of their unannounced visits were meal visits as opposed to the one per year that is required.
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

There were a variety of experiences when discussing technical assistance. Sponsors of family child care homes, in particular, expressed that technical assistance improved with their providers. For example, a sponsor of family child care homes shared that having resources at their fingertips led to fruitful conversations as the monitor would share a relevant link instead of having to lug around a box of resources that may not be as relevant to the needs of the provider. Sponsors of family child care homes also expressed that virtual monitoring enabled them to spend more time with a provider without having to rush out to drive to the next visit in the area. Conversely, a sponsor of child care centers expressed challenges with virtual visits.

"Speaking with reps [monitors] that work with homes, I found the virtual visits more productive especially when providing T.A. Reps [monitors] used to lug around boxes with resources. Now they have a link list and can instantly pull up resources. This branches off into fruitful conversations. They have all of these resources at their fingertips. Providers and the staff are becoming more familiar with those systems and ideas and to see them flourish with that is very special.

- Sponsor of Family Child Care Homes with 900 homes"

EXPANSION

Sponsors of family child care homes, centers, and at risk afterschool programs discussed how remote monitoring helped them expand their programs to rural areas that they wouldn’t have serviced because it is difficult to justify the time and money to drive two hours away (four hours round trip) three times a year or more. A sponsor of at risk afterschool programs shared that they
are based out of Los Angeles, but with virtual monitoring they were able to sponsor at risk afterschool centers in Merced, which is a five hour drive one-way. Virtual monitoring also expanded access for providers who do not speak English as a primary language. It increased the possibility of the sponsor being able to match their monitors to providers based on spoken language, regardless of geographic proximity – resulting in a much more inclusive program.

**VARIETY**

The participants shared an understanding that there are a variety of CACFP programs throughout the community, each of which that have different experiences. The varied program types lead to different needs and there is stark contrast when it comes to monitoring. For example, family child care home sponsors are particularly concerned about their employees mental health and well-being because of the amount of driving that has to be done to visit each individual home. The labor and travel costs to do monitoring for hundreds to one-thousand family child care providers three times a year is cost prohibitive for sponsors. Flexibilities are needed for the number of visits required in-person during the year. The participants also discussed that providing flexibilities for programs to be able to do remote monitoring does not require remote monitoring of the programs who prefer all in-person visits.

> **My L.A. monitor can be driving 4 miles an hour - takes an hour from one facility to another. Is that the best investment of her time? In-person, she’s seeing fewer meals...now [virtual] she can see 2-3 dinners in one day...there is also the risk of illness and the cost of gas here in California. I’m definitely hearing the needs and preferences are different depending on the different type of sponsor we are.**
> -Sponsor of Family Child Care Homes with 800+ homes

**CONNECTION**

Participants expressed the importance of connection and discussed the difference between establishing that connection in-person or over a device – there were mixed reviews. Many talked about how much they enjoyed seeing the children in the programs and interacting with them while
providers made meals or the children shouting “the food program lady is here!” This is something that has been missed by the majority during the pandemic. Many sponsors, however, believed their connection was improved as the monitors could spend more time with the provider instead of spending the day driving from location to location trying to make it to the next site during meal time.

**TECHNOLOGY**

There were many who stated that family child care providers, centers, and staff got really good at using technology, while others mentioned that the glitches with technology was somewhat frustrating. When there were individuals that couldn’t figure out the technology the sponsors accommodated them. It is the sponsor’s philosophy to “meet people where they are.” Overwhelmingly, family child care providers have the necessary skills to utilize technology in the CACFP: they learned how to support children in virtual learning with their schools, they learned how to do it for other things, and they learned how to do it for the monitoring visits. Some center sponsors expressed using technology to see the meals during virtual visits.

“This past February we went to L.A. and San Diego, it was so overwhelming to be up there. The traffic impacts the amount of visits you can complete and their [the monitors] mental health is at risk. We would not eat trying to get to the next visit. We finished the dinner visit by 6:00 p.m. and wouldn’t get back to the hotel until 8:30. It was the same for the Coachella and Indio visits. I’m here to advocate for my monitors.”

—Sponsor of Family Child Care Homes

**PHYSICAL SAFETY. MENTAL HEALTH. ENVIRONMENT.**

Sponsors talked about how driving from site to site is debilitating for the program, for the staff, for the environment, and for their budgets. Driving is hard on monitors. They talked about not eating
all day as they have to get from site to the next, waking up at 4:30 a.m. to make it to a 6:30 a.m. breakfast time, and getting home at 8:30 at night after a dinner visit and fighting traffic all day. Sponsors also talked about some of the perceived dangers of going out to sites including road rage, shootings, and the spread of communicable diseases. The role is taxing for monitors and sponsors expressed a desire to protect their monitor’s mental health and physical safety.

Additionally, it they spoke about the difficulty staffing back up for this difficult role as the labor market has changed. Sponsors from California to Kansas talked about how hard it is to sign up a provider in a rural area so far away because the driving time is not worth the staff hours that the sponsor has to pay, but virtual monitoring makes it so rural providers can be on the food program. They also talked about how hard it was to efficiently serve providers in high-traffic areas because it can take two hours to drive 20 miles. And, of course, all are aware of the carbon footprint and emissions contributing to climate change by requiring all of this travel.

The Bottom Line

At the end of the discussion, the participants came to the conclusion that enabling more flexible monitoring regulations would create a sustainable, equitable, and accessible CACFP in which stakeholders could determine the best possible monitoring process for their community members’ needs in a particular space or moment in time. Technology has outpaced regulation and virtual monitoring can ensure program integrity while enabling inclusive access.

The benefits of allowing flexibilities so sponsors can expand access of the CACFP, improve integrity, and technical assistance by way of virtual monitoring cannot be ignored. It is time to leverage the experiences of the last three years and stand up policies and procedures for CACFP that are reflective of the times in which we live.