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The impact of the 2020 USDA food service  
program waivers and COVID-19 on summer meal  
program operations in Maryland: Perceptions of  
SFSP sponsors

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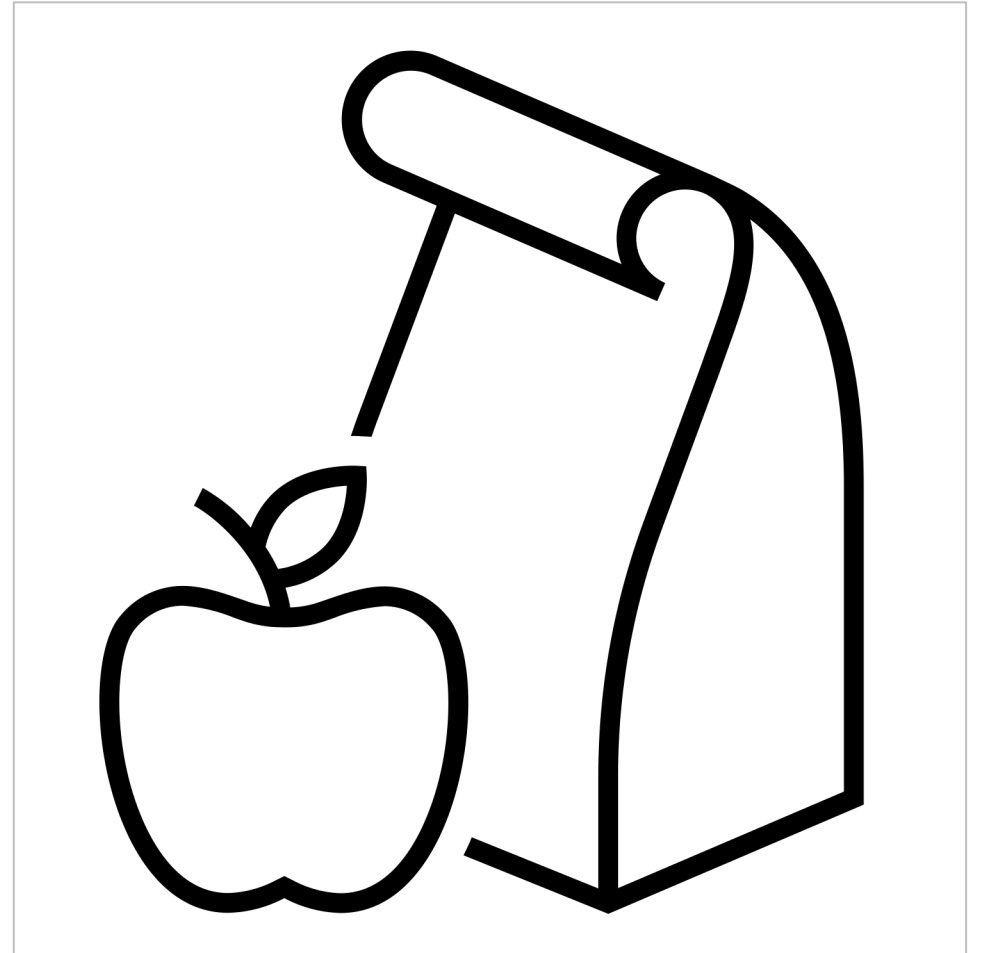
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January 12, 2021

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Solutions, Baltimore, MD, Miami University College of Arts and Sciences, Oxford, OH*

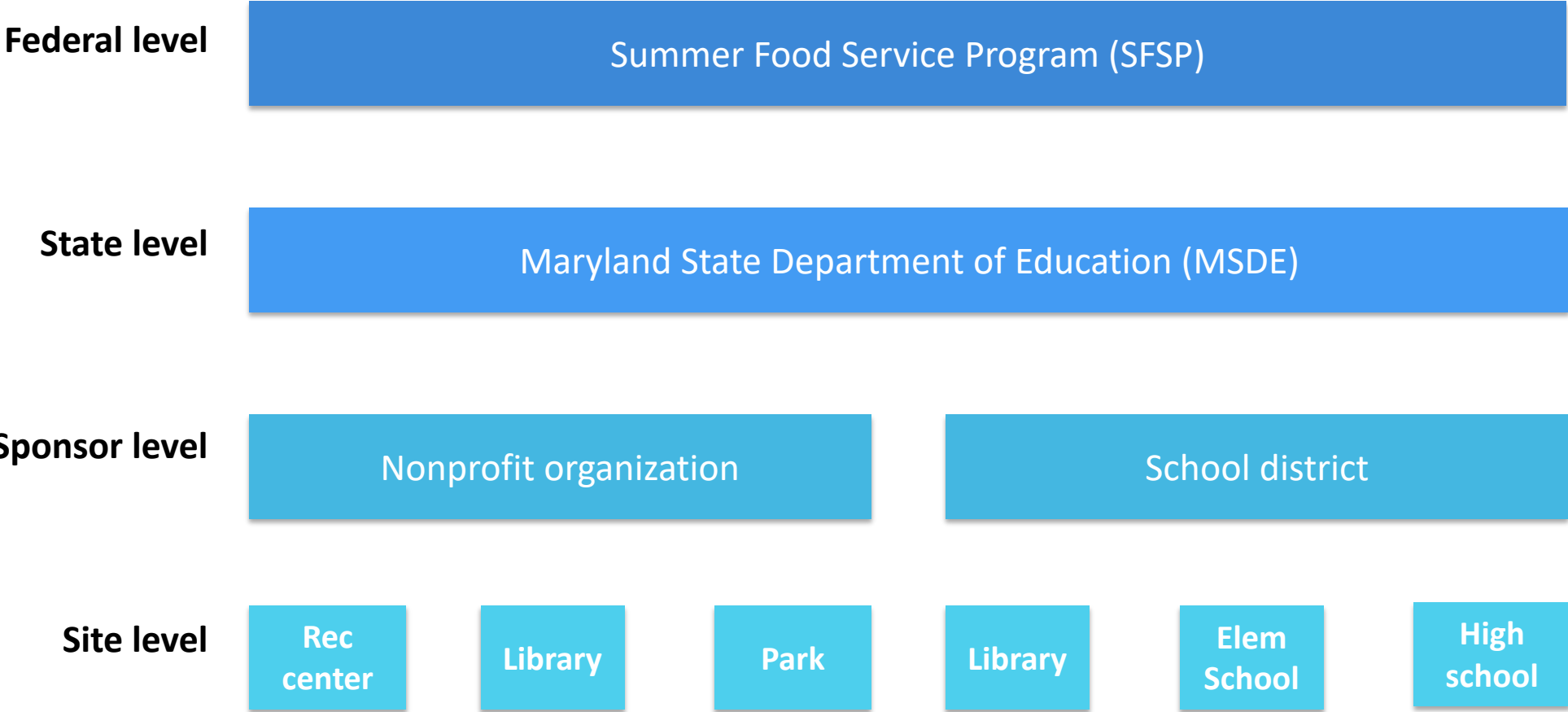


# What is the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)?

- ▶ The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides free meals and snacks to children <18 at sites in low-income communities
- ▶ Most meal sites provide educational, enrichment or recreational activities that keep children learning, active and safe when school is not in session.
- ▶ These programs contribute to children's healthy growth and development by providing them with nutritious meals and snacks over the summer months, a time when children can be more at risk for hunger and weight gain.



# Structure of Summer Food Service Program



# SFSP waivers allowed sponsor flexibility

## 2020 Waivers

- Meal times waivers
- Non-congregate feeding waiver
- Parent/Guardian Meal Pick-up waiver
- Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and Summer food Service Operations
- Obligatory first week site visits
- Offer versus serve" (OVS) flexibility
- Area Eligibility Waivers

**Federal level**

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)

**State level**

Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)

**Sponsor level**

Nonprofit organization

School district

**Site level**

Rec center

Library

Park

Library

Elem School

High school

# Research Question

What was the impact of the 2020 USDA waivers and COVID-19 on summer meal program operations and on the experiences of Maryland SFSP sponsors in summer 2020?



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# Methods

# Data Collection

## Online Survey

- Maryland SFSP Sponsors who served meals in 2020 (n=26)
- Awareness of Waivers
- Perceived Impact of Waivers

## Meal Participation

- Summer meals served in 2018, 2019 and 2020
- Maryland SFSP sponsors (n=43)
- Maryland State Department of Education.

## In-depth Interviews

- SFSP Sponsors (n=13)
- Experiences with the summer meals waivers

# Data analysis - Quantitative

- ▶ Univariate and bivariate statistics calculated for all sponsor characteristics
- ▶ Perceived Impact of Waivers items were assessed by asking agreement with statements. Agreement was measure on a 5-point Likert Scale with 1 indicating Strongly Disagree and 5 indicating Strongly agree.
- ▶ Perceived impact of COVID-19 on sponsor operations was assessed using a similar 5-point Likert scale.



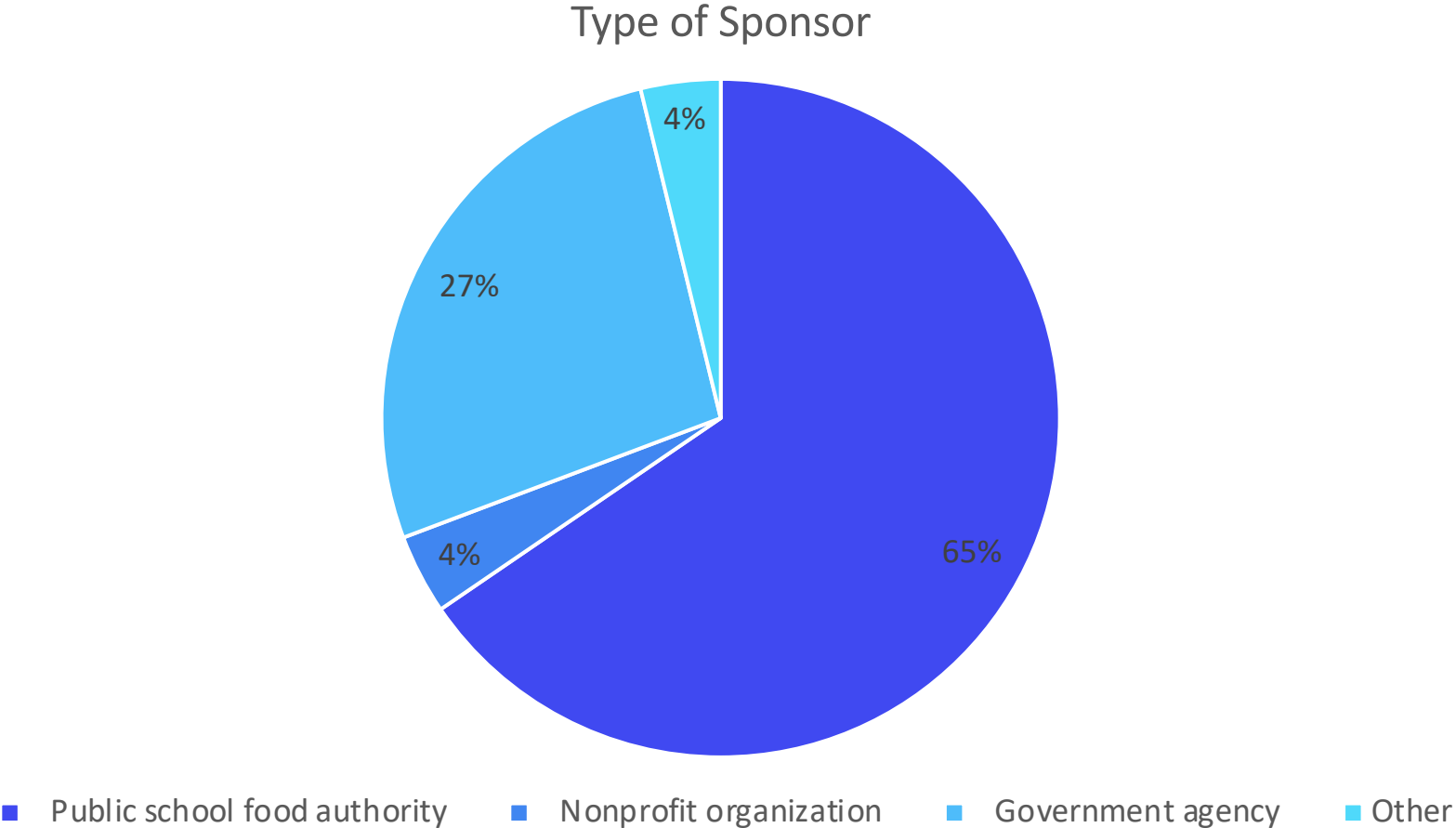


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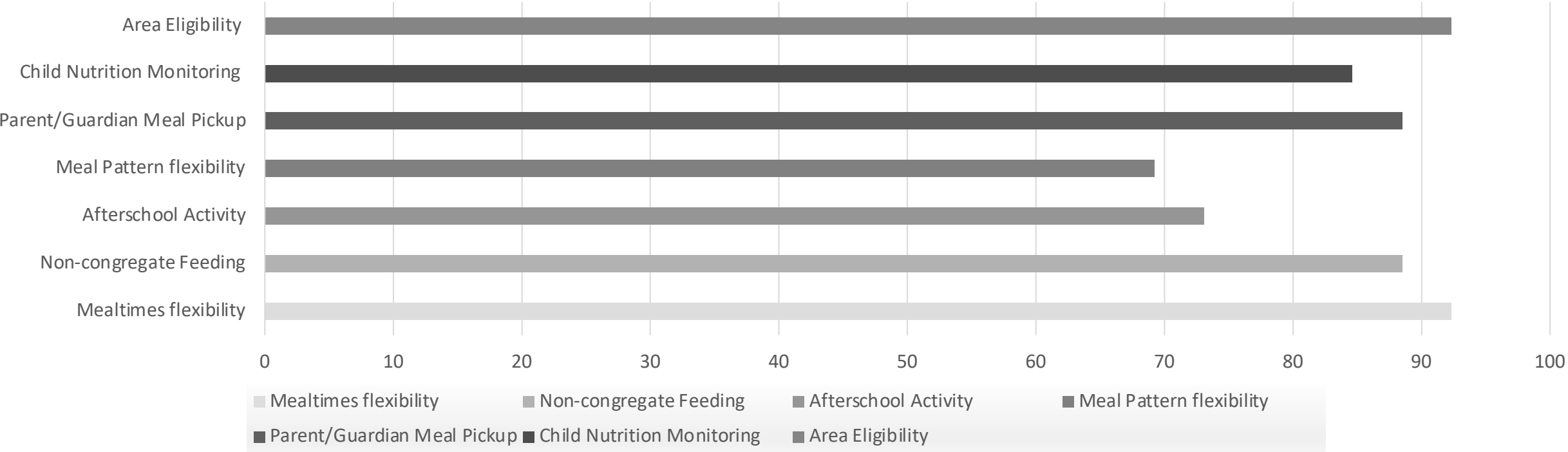
# Results

# Maryland 2020 Summer Food Service Program Meal Sponsor Respondent characteristics (n=26)



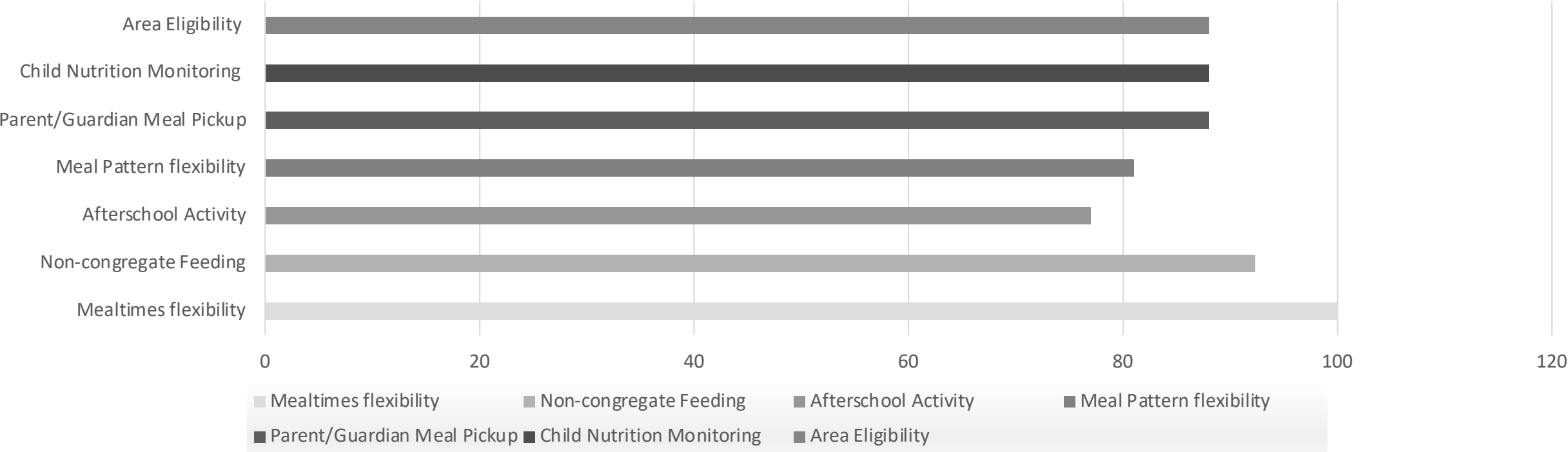
# Maryland 2020 Summer Food Service Program Meal Sponsor Respondent Awareness of Waivers (n=26)

Awareness of Waivers



# Maryland 2020 Summer Food Service Program Meal Sponsor Respondent Perceived Positive Impact of Waivers (n=26)

Perceived Positive Impact of Waivers on feeding children during COVID-19 related school closures

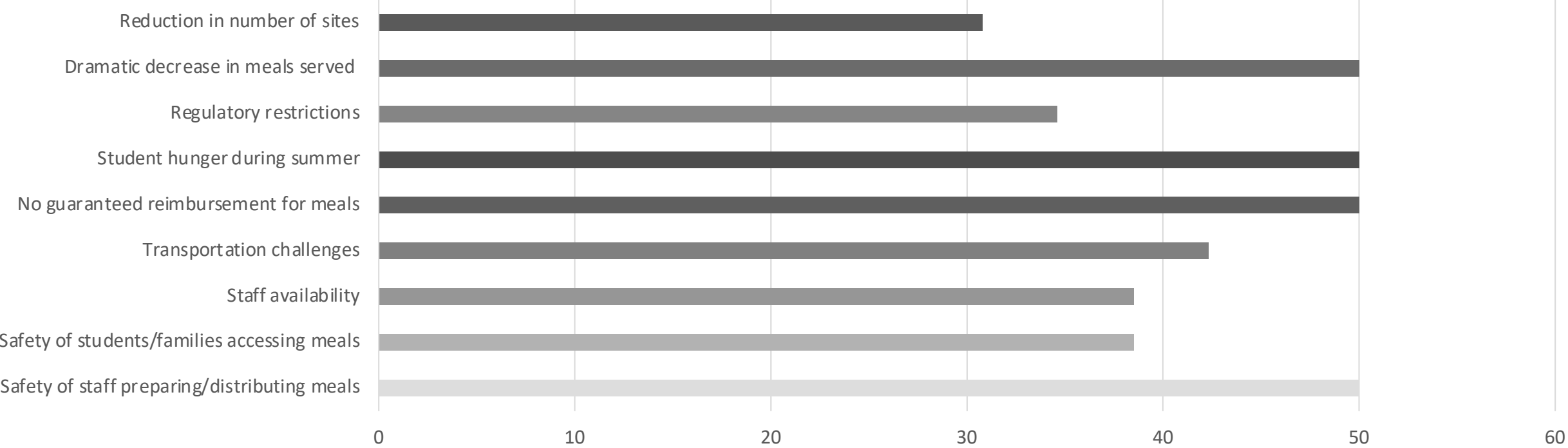


# Maryland 2020 Summer Food Service Program Meal Sponsor Respondent Awareness of Waivers (n=26)

- ▶ **Respondents were overwhelmingly aware of each of the waivers**
  - ▶ Highest awareness (92%): Waivers 1 and 7, allows for service of meals outside of standard mealtimes and area eligibility waivers which extends eligibility for free meals in communities
  - ▶ Lowest awareness (69%): Waiver 4, allows meal pattern flexibility
  - ▶ 81% (n=21) were aware of five or more waivers.
  - ▶ All respondents reported that they were familiar with at least one of the waivers.
- ▶ Respondents overwhelmingly perceived a positive impact of 2020 waivers on feeding children during COVID-19 related school closures

# Maryland 2020 Summer Food Service Program Meal Sponsor Respondent Serious Concerns due to COVID-19 (n=26)

Serious Concerns of SFSP sponsors due to COVID-19 (% respondents)



## Average perceived impact and proportion of Maryland 2020 Summer Food Service Program sponsor respondents that perceived impact of COVID-19 based on survey responses (n=26)

The COVID-19 related operational changes to my program will/have....	N	Mean	SD	n with score $\geq 4$	% with score $\geq 4$
Increase the workload for my staff	26	4.2	1.1	19	73.0
Increase the amount of money my organization will need to spend to continue meal service in Summer 2020	26	4.4	0.9	21	80.8
Need to hire additional staff this summer because of program changes	26	3.1	1.5	10	38.4
Need to cut meals (either breakfast, lunch, supper, or snack) from sites	26	3.2	1.5	12	46.2
Decrease the number of meals served at each site	26	3.0	1.3	11	42.3
Decrease the number of sites we serve	26	3.1	1.1	10	20.0
<i>Average impact score</i>	26	3.5	0.6	-	-

# Conclusions

- ▶ 2020 USDA waivers impacted the operations of the SFSP 2020 MD Sponsors.
- ▶ The majority of Maryland SFSP sponsors overwhelmingly perceived a positive impact of 2020 waivers on feeding children during COVID-19 related school closures.
- ▶ Half of the 2020 SFSP sponsors reported serious concerns about:
  - ▶ Safety of their staff
  - ▶ Potential that students would go hungry during the summer
  - ▶ Providing meals that would not be guaranteed reimbursement under SFSP



# Implications

- ▶ Federal policy changes can have large impacts on local agencies especially during a national crisis.
- ▶ Statewide waivers on behalf of their SFSP sponsors are important in the provision of meals to low-income children during out-of-school time necessitated by a crisis.

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Questions?