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Nutrition in Early Childcare Programs: The Benefits and Barriers

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INTRODUCTION

1 in 5 Vermont children experience food insecurity.¹ Inadequate nutrition threatens cognitive, social, and emotional development in the first years of life.²

49.1% of Vermont children arrive at kindergarten underprepared.³ It has been shown that undernourished children have reduced activity levels and withdraw from their environment, removing them from critical learning opportunities and social interactions.²



Supporting the provision of healthy food in early childcare programs may help address the issue of food insecurity and promote healthy childhood development.

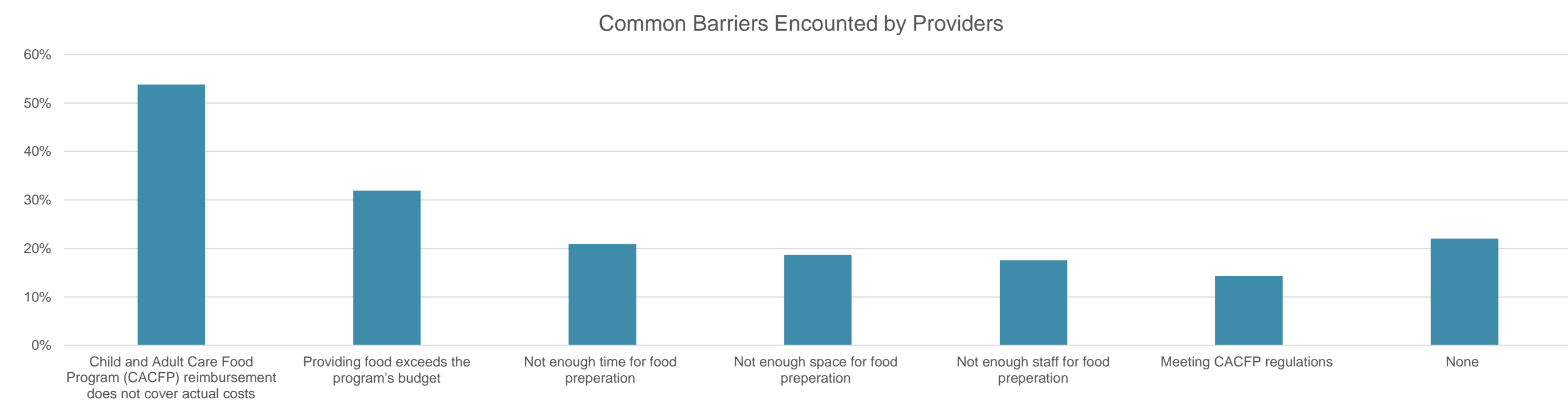
Currently, there are no existing data on both Vermont childcare providers and parents of these children on their perceptions of the importance of providing food in early childcare programs as well as the associated benefits and barriers to do so.

METHODS

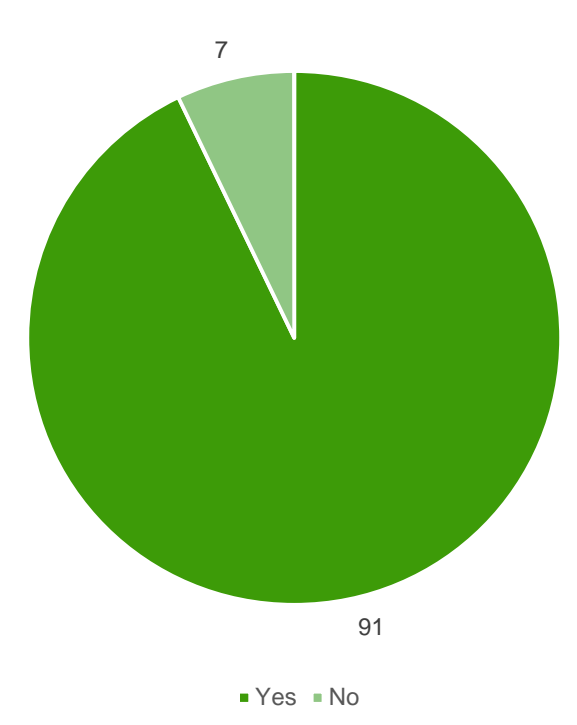
- Population of interest: Vermont childcare providers and parents with children ages 0-5 in childcare in Vermont
- Surveys written in collaboration with community partners, Hunger Free Vermont ("HFV") and Let's Grow Kids ("LGK") were used to gather data on the population of interest
- Licensed or registered childcare providers were called and e-mailed directly and given the opportunity to complete a survey over the phone or via a link sent via e-mail (n=46)
- Electronic surveys were also distributed to childcare providers and parents via e-mail and social media campaign administered by LGK (Providers n=52, Parents n=118)

RESULTS

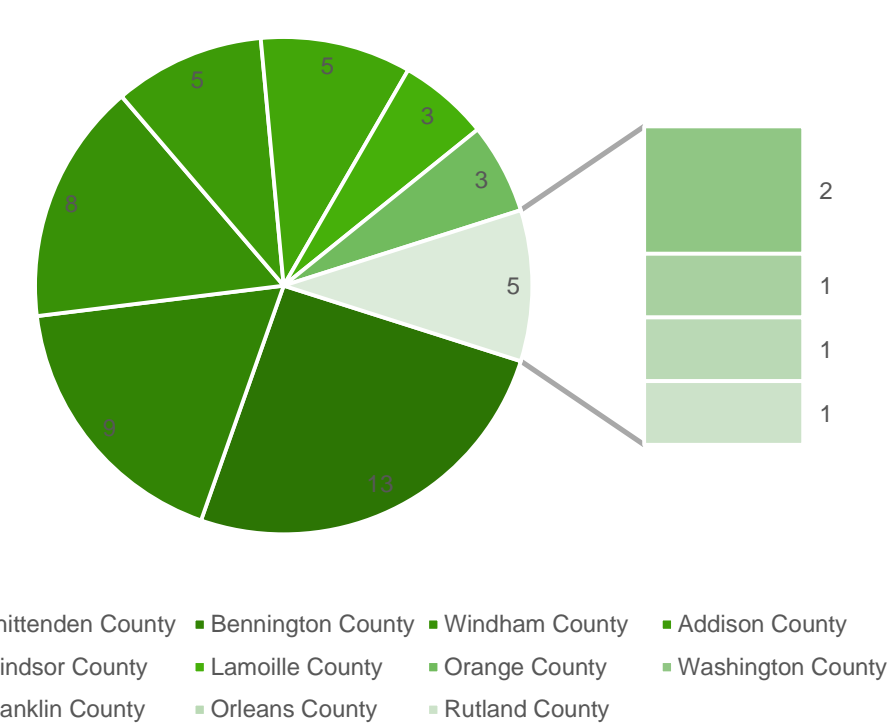
We received survey responses from 98 childcare programs and 181 parents who have children between the age of 0-5 years.



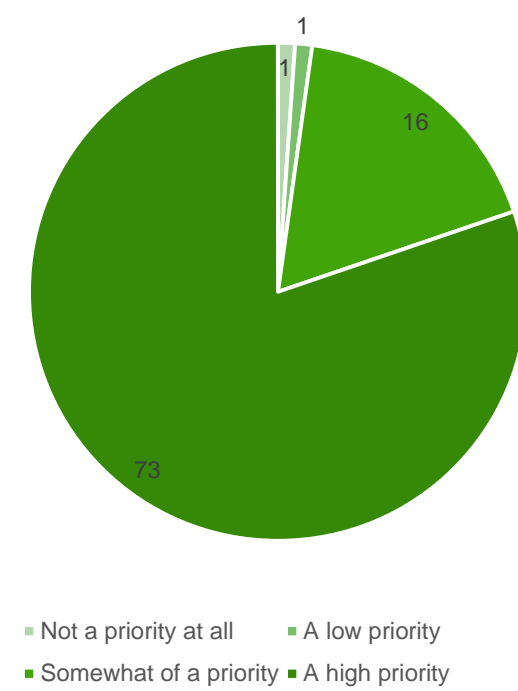
"Does this program provide ANY of the following: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, Snacks, Infant Formula"



Provider Response by County



How high of a priority is providing food as a part of this program?



"We play an integral role in bringing nutritious food to young children... [but] CACFP [reimbursement] makes it challenging" – **VT childcare provider**

"I'm super grateful that my childcare program follows CACFP... she's getting servings of vegetables and fruit each day" – **VT parent**

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The limited sample size of providers who do not serve food (n=7) did not permit an adequate analysis of additional resources or assistance measures that could facilitate providing food. Focused recruitment of this group would help provide a better picture.

Since food is already being provided by many of the programs, it would be beneficial to further understand the type of food that is being provided and the provider's understanding of a balanced nutrition.

Better understanding of the challenges facing inadequate CACFP reimbursements and meeting CACFP regulation is need.

DISCUSSION

78.0% of surveyed childcare providers in Vermont experience at least one challenge in providing food, the most common being that Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) reimbursement does not cover actual costs (53.8%), followed by 31.9% saying providing food exceeds the program's budget.

Despite these barriers, **89.0%** of surveyed providers reported that they provide at least one of the following: breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and/or infant formula.

Understanding the perceived benefits of providing food gives us some insight as to why providers choose to serve food. **95.6%** of providers believe that providing food ensures access to food for children who may not have enough food at home and that children will eat foods that are healthier than what their parents provide.

Parents and childcare providers were generally in agreement on the importance of the characteristics of the food that is served, especially the importance of healthy food.



Cultural and religious dietary needs were not as important to parents as they were to child care providers (P<0.001). Food that is easy to prepare was more important to providers (albeit not among the most important characteristics for providers) than it was to parents (P<0.001).

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