Nutrition News

Happy Helpings
Georgia's Summer Food Service Program

November 1, 2026

Four Happy Helpings Sponsors Earn Summer 2025 Turnip the Beet! Awards



We're proud to announce that four Happy Helpings sponsors were recently named winners of the USDA's Turnip the Beet! High-Quality Summer Meals Award Program for summer 2025. This national award recognizes exceptional summer meal program sponsors that go above and beyond to serve high-quality, nutritious, and appealing meals to children throughout the summer.

City of Atlanta | Silver Award
City of Atlanta incorporated healthier options into familiar foods that children already enjoy, such as whole-grain chips and wraps. Through Plates at the Park, children also participated in hands-on cooking demonstrations featuring simple, affordable recipes such as rainbow veggie and chicken quesadillas, fruit smoothies, and whole-grain grilled cheese sandwiches.

Peace Baptist Church | Silver Award
Peace Baptist Church connected summer meals with hands-on learning through its popular Farm to Table enrichment classes. Participants helped prepare meals, taste-tested new menu items, learned about summer meal requirements, and suggested compliant menu ideas. When the church's food pantry received an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables, including cucumbers and corn, participants learned how to pickle cucumbers and shared them with other students.

Small Treasures Learning Center, Inc. | Silver Award
Small Treasures Learning Center, Inc. made participant feedback part of its summer meal program through kid-friendly approaches such as visual surveys, taste-test ratings, and a "What's Missing?" jar where children could suggest foods they would like to see on the menu. The program used this feedback to help shape menus and show children that their opinions matter.

Fannin County Recreation Department | Bronze Award
Fannin County Recreation Department incorporated hands-on nutrition education using a Charlie Cart from The Charlie Cart Project. The mobile cooking cart gave children opportunities to practice measuring and cooking while preparing kid-friendly recipes from the accompanying cookbook.

Congratulations to all four winners for their commitment to providing nutritious, appealing summer meals and meaningful experiences for Georgia's children.

Although the Summer 2026 nominations deadline has passed, we hope these highlights inspire other Happy Helpings sponsors to consider applying for Turnip the Beet! High- Quality Summer Meals Award Program in summer 2027.

To learn more and view the complete list of award recipients, visit the **USDA Turnip the Beet webpage**.

DECAL Celebrated Farm to School and Farm to Early Care and Education Month



Throughout October, schools, early care and education (ECE) programs, farmers, and communities across Georgia celebrated National Farm to School and Farm to Early Care and Education Month.

This year's theme, "Taste the State," encouraged Georgians to explore fresh, locally grown foods while promoting healthy eating habits and strengthening connections between children, families, and local farmers.

Participants were encouraged to incorporate Georgia-grown foods into meals, engage children in hands-on nutrition education activities, and celebrate the importance of supporting local agriculture.

Although October's celebration is coming to an end, the opportunity to incorporate local foods and nutrition education into daily activities continues year-round.

Visit DECAL's **Farm to ECE Month Webpage** to explore resources, including:

- Books featuring local food resources
- Farm-themed active games
- Partner resources to support child, family, and community programming

Thank you to everyone who participated in this year's celebration and helped promote healthy eating and local agriculture across Georgia.

Get a Head Start on Planning for Summer 2027

Items to Complete in November & December 2026

Providing summer meals through Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program, is a year-round effort. Although summer 2026 has ended, now is the perfect time to reflect on successes, identify opportunities for improvement, and begin preparing for summer 2027.

Taking steps now can help sponsors strengthen operations, expand meal access, and reach more children in their communities.

November 2026: Reflect, Evaluate, and Set Goals

- Meet with site administrators and staff to review summer 2026 operations, discuss successes, and identify areas for improvement
- Evaluate vendor performance, meal quality, delivery schedules, and feedback from children and families
- Review menus and make adjustments to improve meal variety, nutritional quality, and participant satisfaction
- Identify unserved and underserved communities where additional summer meal sites may be needed

- Begin recruiting potential meal sites in areas with limited access to summer meals
- Compare summer 2026 participation with previous years and review local school free and reduced-price meal participation data to identify opportunities for growth
- Recognize high-performing sites and staff for their contributions to a successful summer
- Connect with sites that experienced low participation to discuss challenges and strategies for increasing meal service in 2027
- Establish measurable participation and outreach goals for summer 2027
- Watch for announcements from DECAL regarding required FY2027 sponsor training and important program deadlines
- Begin developing a marketing and outreach strategy to increase awareness of free summer meals among families and community partners

December 2026: Strengthen Partnerships and Prepare for Summer

- Contact previous meal sites to determine which locations plan to return for summer 2027
- Explore opportunities to establish new meal sites in unserved and underserved areas.
- Connect with schools, nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, local governments, and other community partners to expand program reach
- Begin planning site staff training, meal preparation, delivery schedules, and enrichment activities for children
- Evaluate opportunities for mobile meal service and other allowable meal service options to reach children in rural or hard-to-access communities
- Review staffing needs, operational resources, and potential program expenses for the upcoming summer
- Continue developing your marketing and outreach campaign, including social media, community events, and partnerships with local organizations
- Create a preliminary timeline of important tasks and milestones to keep summer 2027 planning on track

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Presentation on Budget Enhancements in ATLAS Now Available for Review

Decal Nutrition Services recently hosted an ATLAS Budget Enhancements Information Session held on Wednesday, October 14, 2026, facilitated by Gwendolyn Howard, Nutrition Services Budget Compliance Supervisor.

The session highlighted important new enhancements in ATLAS designed to improve budget accuracy, streamline submission processes, and enhance financial tracking and compliance.

Key updates covered during the session include:

- Budget Questions and Assertions: Updated procurement thresholds and new required selections.
- Site Application and Budget Validations: Enhanced validation of average daily attendance, meal participation, and operating days.
- Prior-Year Excess Funds: New features for tracking and allocating excess funds within the Budget Detail.
- Budget Forms and Attachments: Improved access to required budget forms and a dedicated section for uploading supporting documentation.
- Specific Prior Written Approval (SPWA): A new electronic submission process for requests requiring prior written approval.

Review the Presentation

The PowerPoint presentation discussed during Wednesday's session is now available for your review. We encourage all program operators to review and retain this presentation as a reference when preparing future budget submissions and revisions.

Click here to view the presentation on the Budget Enhancements in ATLAS

For questions or additional assistance, contact the DECAL Nutrition Services Budget Team at **nutritionbudget@decal.ga.gov**.

Happy Helpings Reconciliation Past Due

Annual Year-End Reconciliation Requirement for FY2026

Institutions operating the FY2026 Happy Helpings Summer Food Program (May 2026- Aug 2026) must complete an Annual Reconciliation Form. The form was due October 31.

If you haven't already done so, please submit the requested documents AS SOON AS POSSIBLE to avoid any delays in FY2027 Happy Helpings approval.

The reconciliation form and supporting financial documentation should be submitted to **nutritionbudget@decal.ga.gov**. Include the name of the institution and agreement number in the subject line of the email.

Review the **reconciliation form** and **instructions**.

Ask Questions!

If you have questions about your costs or the reconciliation process, contact **Finance.Nutrition@decal.ga.gov**. Include the name of the institution and agreement number in the subject line of the email.

Target Counties for Summer 2027

One of Nutrition Services' goals is to have a meal site in every county of the state. Last summer, you played a crucial role in our significant progress toward that goal by expanding meal service to 111 counties in 2026. Thank you.

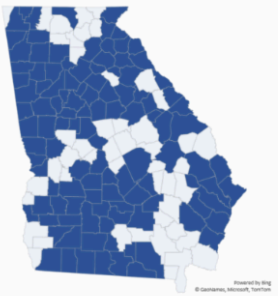
If your organization has the capacity to expand your meal service in 2027, consider serving meals and snacks in any of the following target counties:

Nutrition Services DECAL

Happy Helpings
Georgia's Summer Food Service Program

FY27 Target Counties: 48 Counties

1. Appling	11. Crawford	21. Lumpkin	31. Quitman	41. Twiggs
2. Atkinson	12. Dade	22. Marion	32. Schley	42. Union
3. Bacon	13. Dawson	23. McDuffie	33. Screven	43. Upson
4. Baldwin	14. Early	24. Miller	34. Seminole	44. Ware
5.Berrien	15. Forsyth	25. Montgomery	35. Stewart	45. Washington
6.Bleckley	16. Gilmer	26. Murray	36. Tattnall	46. White
7. Brantley	17. Gordon	27. Oconee	37. Taylor	47. Wilkes
8. Camden	18. Jenkins	28. Peach	38. Toombs	48. Wilkinson
9. Candler	19. Johnson	29. Pickens	39. Towns	
10. Charlton	20. Jones	30. Pierce	40. Treutlen	



Georgia Dept of Early Care and Learning
BRIGHT FROM THE START

Blue: Counties where HH meals were available in FY26
White: Counties where meals were not available in FY26

Upcoming Training

November 12, 2026
Building Better Menus with the Dietary Guidelines
6:00 - 7:00 p.m.

This training will introduce the new Dietary Guidelines and provide practical, budget-friendly strategies for incorporating more real foods into CACFP and Happy Helpings menus.

[Register Now]

Registration is a two-step process:

- **Step 1**: After registering in GA ATLAS, you will receive a training confirmation email *immediately* from Georgia DECAL Help Desk - **helpdesk@cnpus.com** with a registration link to attend the webinar **(check your spam/junk folder)**.
- **Step 2**: You must then register for the training using the link provided on the training confirmation e-mail.
- If you have an issue with registering, contact Leslie Truman before the day of training.
- **Click here** if you need a refresher on how to register for training in GA ATLAS.

Note: Only the program contact can self-register in GA ATLAS. If an additional person will be attending, contact Leslie Truman at (404) 657-1779.

Training Resources

In Case You Missed It: Webinar Recordings Now Available!

If you missed a webinar, visit the **Training and Technical Assistance** webpage for previously recorded webinars.



Harvest of the Month

2026-2027 Calendar

The Georgia Early Care and Education Harvest of the Month is a collaborative campaign between Quality Care for Children, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, and the Georgia Department of Human Services. The campaign encourages healthy eating habits by promoting different local, seasonal fruits or vegetables each month.

Visit DECAL's **Harvest of the Month Pinterest Page** for recipes, culinary tips, classroom activity ideas, and more.

For school-age children resources, visit the Georgia Department of Education's Harvest of the Month **webpage**.

Dates to Remember

DATE	EVENTS
November	Harvest of the Month: Sweet Potatoes
November 11	State Holiday: Veterans Day
November 12	Webinar: Building Better Menus with the Dietary Guidelines
November 26	State Holiday: Thanksgiving Day
November 27	State Holiday: Day After Thanksgiving

DECAL Download

Expand Grants



This week we're talking about access to child care outside the traditional 9-to-5 workday. Recently DECAL offered hundreds of thousands of dollars in EXPAND Grants for Expanding Parents' Access to Nontraditional Delivery.

These were available to nonprofit organizations, government entities, and child care providers to support offering care during evenings and weekends giving more parents the support they need to work, attend classes, pursue training, and strengthen their family's economic stability. So how did we do?

Joining us to talk about the EXPAND Grants and their impact on Georgia is Jill Taylor, Director of Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach, and Shayna Funke, Director of Research Partnerships and Business Supports, and from the Carl Vinson Institute of Government are Veronica Lopez-Delgado and Brian Simmons.

Listen to the episode **here**.

Happy Helpings Resources

The following documents were covered in previous newsletters:

- **Adding New Sites After Application Approval**
- **Health Permit Verification Requirements**
- **Important Update: New GA@WORK Supplier Portal**
- **Updated Income Eligibility Guidelines Released**
- **Determining The Correct Form To Use For Excess Funds**
- **2026 Reimbursement Rates**
- **Requesting Advance Payments**
- **Happy Helpings Summit Training Videos**
- **Resources to Promote Meal Sites**
- **New Supplier Change Request**
- **Have You Determined this Summer's Food Cost & Procurement Methods?**
- **Check you Email Messages in GA ATLAS**
- **And Justice for All Posters**
- **Resources to Market Meal Sites**

How was my Customer Service?

Provide feedback on your experience with the Nutrition Team



Click on the icon on the right to participate in the customer service survey. Responses are anonymous.

Nutrition Services
DECAL

Nutrition Division
Marketing & Outreach

Cindy Kicklighter
Joann Kilpatrick

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