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FOCUS ON HEALTH: Summer help for hungry kids

By Valerie Dennis
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Special to The Enterprise

School is out and summer vacations have begun. But while summer is usually considered to be full of freedom and fun, an estimated 12 million children in this country will face hunger, partially due to the loss of meals served at school. In Yolo County, nearly 13,000 students are eligible for the National School Lunch Program.

Hunger does not take a summer vacation. When school is out, many children no longer have access to the free or reduced-price school meals because numerous federally subsidized school breakfasts and lunches become unavailable. Summer school programs have been dramatically cut due to districts facing severe budget cuts. Many families are left struggling to stretch already-limited food budgets even further with yet another gap to fill.

Research indicates that even mild undernutrition experienced by children during critical periods of growth impacts their behavior, their school performance, and their overall cognitive development, including reductions in physical growth and adversely brain development. Proper nutrition is vital to the normal growth and development of children. Health problems such as weight loss, fatigue, headaches, irritability, and the inability to concentrate have also been found to be consequences of hunger.

The USDA Summer Food Service Program is intended to help fill this gap and is the single largest federal resource available for local agencies that want to combine a feeding program with a summer activity program. Through the SFSP, summer programs can provide up to two healthy meals or snacks per day, five days per week to children and teenagers, 18 years and younger. Food Banks, schools, public agencies, summer day camps, and other nonprofit organizations are frequent sponsors of these SFSP programs.

Nationally, this Summer Food Service Program has been underutilized, primarily because families do not know that it is available for their children. Help is needed to raise awareness of this important program. Children can get free lunches regardless of whether they are actually enrolled in summer school or parks programs. See below for information on who in Yolo County operate a Summer Food Service Program:

n Patty Smith at Davis Joint Unified School District Student Nutrition Services, (530) 759-2186

n Zan Wimberly at Woodland Joint Unified School District Nutrition Services, (530) 406-5956

n Brandi Dionne at West Sacramento Parks and Recreation Department, (916) 617-4615

n Cathy Olsen at Winters Joint Unified School District Food Services, (530) 795-6109

Building a food network is a huge undertaking, even in good economic times, and in these challenging times it can be overwhelming. But together, we can and do make a difference.

The Food Bank is at 1244 Fortuna Ave. in Woodland. For more information about how you can get involved in the fight to alleviate hunger and malnutrition in Yolo County, call (530) 668-0690 or visit <http://www.foodbankyc.org>

— Valerie Dennis is the Yolo County Food Bank's bookkeeper and office manager.