

Bridging the Summer Meal Gap

This month, children across the country have begun summer vacation. While summer vacation is considered to be freedom for many children, for the millions at risk of hunger it means losing the one place that they can count on for a meal.

Research has shown that even mild malnutrition experienced by young children during critical periods of growth may lead to reductions in physical growth and adversely affect brain development. Proper nutrition is vital to the growth and development of children, particularly for low-income children.

For most of the country, the face of hunger is surprising. It does not discriminate against age, race, gender or ethnicity. It affects working families who are forced to make difficult choices between food and basic necessities such as heat, medicine or rent. Families of more than 20 million children across the nation rely on free or reduced-priced school meals to feed their children throughout the academic year. Consequently, these families are left struggling to find a way to keep their children fed when these programs end and summer vacation begins.

The USDA's Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which provides low-income children with free, nutritious meals during the summer months when school is not in session, is intended to fill this gap. SFSP is the single largest federal resource available for local community organizations that want to combine a feeding program with a summer activity program. For more information about the Summer Food Service Program in your area, contact your local school district.

Here, locally, services that ensure vulnerable children have enough to eat are more important than ever during the summer months. With a food insecurity rate of 17.5 percent in Yolo County, the Food Bank is fortunate to collaborate and partner with other charitable organizations that not only help meet the child hunger gap throughout the school year, but continue to be reliable sources of food to children once school is out.

In Yolo County, communities are served by, for example, the Yolo County YMCA, Woodland Child Development Center, Noah's Ark Preschool & Childcare, RISE, Inc., Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network, and Migrant Education, among many other groups, that work diligently to guarantee that the children their programs support have access to a nutritious snack or meal. Thanks to these efforts, children in our community have a better chance of starting the school year next fall ready to learn.

For more information on the Food Bank, and its programs, visit: foodbankyc.org, or call (530) 668-0690.

— *Shawn Kramer is the community relations coordinator at the Food Bank of Yolo County*

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