

Hunger Action Calls for Action to Increase Number of NY Children Receiving Summer meals

Participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs continues to miss many low-income children in NYS, with only 314,986 low-income children receiving summer meals in July 2010, according to a new national report released today by the Food Research and Action Center.

The Hunger Action Network of NYS noted that while participation had decreased from the previous July, New York ranked third best in the country even though it reached only 28.6 children for every 100 who got regular school year meals.

If New York was able to boost participation to serve 40 percent of eligible low-income children, the state would feed an additional 124,971 children and get an extra \$8.4 million in federal child nutrition funds.

NYS' numbers are better due to easier access to summer meals programs in NYC where local schools participate in the programⁱ. In the rest of the state, nonprofits and other government agencies such as Public Housing Authorities often have to be the ones that provide the meals if they are available at all. Finding site sponsors for the summer meals programs remains a major barrier.

Hunger Action has been involved over the years in outreach campaigns to improve the participation in the summer meal programs in the Capital District, New York City and Dutchess County. A major focus has been recruiting new sponsors and sites for the programs, such as public pools which a large number of children use during the summer.

“While participation in other federal nutrition programs grew rapidly because of the recession, participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs continued to slide. It’s time to reverse this trend. This is a time for action,” said Mark Dunlea, Executive Director of the Hunger Action Network of NYS. “State officials have been supportive over the years of efforts to expand the program but more must be done, especially with the incidence of hunger on the rise. Emergency food programs, including soup kitchens, see a big increase in children during the summer months when they can't access the school meal programs,” added Dunlea.

NY's performance was better than the national rate, which reaches only one in seven eligible low-income children, according to *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation*, an annual analysis by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). The FRAC report measures national and state trends in summer nutrition and compares states by determining for each the number of low-income children receiving summer food compared to the number of such children who receive regular school year lunch.

The summer food program unfortunately remains the least well-funded of the various federal child nutrition programs, and Congress failed to make many needed improvement during the reauthorization that was approved in December 2010. Of particular interest to New York was the proposal to expand the open-site eligibility threshold from areas where 50% of the children are eligible for free or reduced meals to areas where 40% of the children are eligible for free or reduced meals; this was particularly critical for many upstate and rural communities. (Once a site is declared "open", any child can receive a meal without the need to meet an income eligibility test.)

Some reforms however were approved, including reducing the paperwork needed to operate summer meal sites. A cap on the number of sites and children served by nonprofit sponsors has been removed. Schools are also required to help with summer food outreach.

“There is an opportunity for all stakeholders to make a difference in participation and ensure that more children can access summer meals,” said Jim Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center. “The Summer Nutrition Programs are a vital part of our nation’s nutrition safety net. There is a foundation on which we can build and which we cannot afford to weaken further. From the federal level to the state and local levels, we must make access to Summer Nutrition a top priority.”

At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is helping lead the charge with the first-ever *National Summer Food Service Program Week: “Food That’s In, When School Is Out.”* This week-long campaign (June 6-10) aims to raise awareness about the risk of hunger low-income children face during the summer months and the benefits of summer food.

The Summer Nutrition Programs, which include the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program, fill the food gap for the thousands of low-income children who rely on school breakfast and lunch during the school year to help keep hunger at bay. Through these programs, children, aged 18 and under, can receive free meals at participating summer sites at schools, parks, other public agencies, and nonprofits.

ⁱ NYC however remains third lowest among large cities in the percent of children participating in the school breakfast program. (see separate study on breakfast at <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/urbanbreakfast2009-2010.pdf>). This thus also makes NYC look better in terms of the percentage of school meal children also receiving summer meals.