

Summer Nutrition Programs in Trouble; Failing to Meet Growing Need

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Washington, DC – While participation in virtually every other key federal nutrition program has grown to meet increased need during the recession, participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs fell last summer according to *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation*, an analysis by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). Structural problems in the nutrition programs were exacerbated by major budget cuts by state and local governments to summer schools, which eroded the number of programs where summer food could be offered. The combination meant that when summer food participation needed to be rising, there instead was a dip of 2.5 percent – or 73,000 low-income children – from July 2008 to July 2009.

In other words, summer food participation fell while regular year school lunch participation by low-income children rose by nearly 800,000 children from school year 2007-2008 to 2008-2009, showing how the recession has driven up need.

Releasing the report two weeks after radio personality Rush Limbaugh suggested that needy children should just eat fast food or “dumpster-dive” during the summer, FRAC calls for public officials and leaders to take responsibility for helping hungry children and reach more of them with summer food programs.

“The fact that participation fell at a time when the economy was weak and children needed the Summer Nutrition Programs the most is particularly disturbing. Low-income children across the country clearly bore the brunt of budget cuts,” said Jim Weill, President of the Food Research and Action Center. “The Summer Nutrition Programs have an important role, but they are in trouble and must be improved.”

“Congress is considering child nutrition reauthorization legislation this summer,” said Weill. “This is an opportunity to reject the snide nihilism of a Rush Limbaugh and instead help children, communities and the nation's future.”

For states, low participation means they are missing out on available federal funds that can help them feed children when they are the hungriest. If states boosted participation to serve just 40 percent of eligible low-income children, they would receive an additional \$289 million in federal funds just for July nutrition programs – and help an additional 4.2 million children.

FRAC measures the effectiveness of the Summer Nutrition Programs by comparing the number of low-income children receiving summer meals to those receiving free and reduced-price school meals during the normal school year. While 17.5 million low-income children received school lunch during the 2008-2009 school year, only 2.8 million children got summer food when school was out. That means the Summer Nutrition Programs reached only 16.1 percent of low-income children with summer meals in July 2009. This percentage was a significant decrease when compared to 17.3 percent in 2008 and 21.1 percent in 2001.

The loss of summer nutrition school sites in many states meant that the platforms on which Summer Nutrition

Programs – which include the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program – rely often were no longer available.

Despite the nationwide state budget challenges, some states managed to improve participation and reach more low-income children with summer meals. West Virginia led the way with a 24.8 percent increase in the number of children served by the Summer Nutrition Programs in July 2009, compared to 2008, followed by Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi and Montana. On the other hand, 11 states served less than one-tenth of their low-income children through their Summer Nutrition Programs in 2009, with two states – Oklahoma and Mississippi – serving just 1 in 20 of their low-income children.

The fact that so many states managed to increase participation, and in particular that Summer Food Service Program numbers of sites and children served rose (while school lunch summer sites plummeted) shows that there are inherent strengths in the program on which administrators and policymakers can build.

Next Steps

FRAC is calling on Congress to expand the reach of the Summer Nutrition Programs by:

Improving the program's too-narrow area eligibility test so that children from low-income families in a broader range of poor communities are able to participate;

Expanding to all states a Year-Round Summer Food Pilot, currently only in effect in California, which reduces paperwork and eases administrative requirements for community-based sponsors that serve children during both the summer and after school during the school year;

Providing grants to sponsors for start-up and expansion costs and transportation of children in order to bring new sponsors into the program and allow existing sponsors to serve more children; and

Increasing reimbursement rates so that schools, local government agencies, and private nonprofit organizations are able to operate the program without losing money and can provide healthier food.

“Increased funding for child nutrition programs would ensure that more low-income children have access to summer meals that stave off hunger, help reduce obesity, and draw children into educational and enrichment programs that keep them learning throughout the summer,” said Jim Weill, president of FRAC. “Congress must make these programs stronger so we can take a decisive step forward in meeting President Barack Obama's goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015.”

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

About the report: The Food Research and Action Center's annual summer report, *Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation*, gives data for all states and looks at national trends. The report measures participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs by comparing the number of children receiving summer meals to the number of

children receiving school lunch during the regular school year. FRAC measures national summer participation during the month of July, when typically all children are out of school throughout the month and lose access to regular year school meals. The report is available online at www.frac.org.

The Food Research and Action Center (www.frac.org) is the leading national organization working for more effective public and private policies to eradicate domestic hunger and undernutrition.

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