

Hunger looms over Florida children this summer



Your Turn
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Guest columnist

Summer break is already underway in the Sunshine State, and for many of us that conjures up memories of pool parties, barbecues, and fun with friends. But for hundreds of thousands of Floridan kids, summer can be the hungriest time of year.

That's because when the academic year ends, the free and low-cost meals kids eat at school can become more difficult to access. During the school year, kids can count on breakfast, lunch, and afterschool meals. When they're not coming to school every day, kids miss out on this essential source of nutrition, and many parents and caregivers struggle to stretch their budget to replace the meals their kids usually eat at school.

This summer, those challenges are magnified by inflation. Parents already struggling to make ends meet are grappling with the higher cost of food and fuel.

At the same time, families have lost the critical lifelines that helped keep them afloat through the economic strain of the past two years, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) emergency allotments and the expanded Child Tax Credit payments.

The unfortunate reality is that we could be looking at the hungriest summer yet for the one in five kids in Florida who live with food insecurity. And we know

summer hunger can have a long-term impact on a child's health, ability to learn, and general well-being.

This means the summer meal programs run by local schools and community groups will be more important than ever.

These programs can help fill the gap by providing healthy meals at no cost to kids and teens at familiar places like parks, pools, libraries, schools, and recreation centers.

Because Congress and the White House failed to extend the federal child nutrition waivers that allowed summer meal sites the flexibility to adapt to ongoing challenges like staffing shortages and severe supply chain disruptions, summer meal programs will look a little different this year than they did the last two summers. For example, children must go in person to pick up a meal each day and must eat that meal on site.

Each year, summer meals reach only a fraction of the kids who need them, in large part due to a lack of awareness about the availability of summer meals or where to find them.

That's why No Kid Hungry launched its summer meals texting service, which makes it quick and easy for families to find their nearest summer meal site. Parents, grandparents, and caregivers can simply text 'FOOD' or 'COMIDA' to 304-304 to find free summer meals in their community.

It's important that parents know that the meal sites presented are open to all children. In fact, the more kids that participate in summer meal programs, the more funding those programs receive to reach the kids most at risk of summer hunger. No paperwork, registration, proof of residency, or citizenship is required - kids can just show up and pick up a meal.



Volunteers bag food at Second Harvest Food Bank to give out to students in the Big Bend in 2020. Free and low-cost meals for kids can be more difficult to access in summer. ALICIA DEVINE/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

During the pandemic, we saw something extraordinary: schools, non-profits, business leaders, and elected officials at all levels of government working together to ensure families had enough to eat.

Though the challenges facing our communities look different than they did in March of 2020, their impact is the same. Floridians are finding it increasingly difficult to buy enough groceries to feed their kids.

We must continue to work together to ensure all Florida kids can enjoy the happy, hunger-free summer they deserve, and that they can return to school in the fall fueled and ready to learn.

Sky Beard is director of No Kid Hungry Florida, based in Melbourne.