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Wednesday, 19 June 2013 14:16

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While the term “food insecurity” has become the new buzz word and politically correct name for hunger, the issue of hunger continues to remain the same.

Texas has one of the highest rates of “food insecurity” in the nation with roughly 2 million Lone Star State residents (18.5 percent) living in households that struggle to put enough food on the table. Of those 2 million Texas residents, many of them are children who endure bouts of hunger throughout three critical months of the year, the summer.

For years, research has shown a direct correlation between good nutrition and the ability to learn. The National Institute of Health states that hungry children are more likely to suffer headaches, stomach aches, colds and infections. They go on to say that children who suffer with issues of hunger are less likely to learn as much, as fast or as well as children who are the beneficiaries of stable meals. During the school year, kids who have limited access to quality meals are less likely to perform well in school, are more likely to be at risk of poor health and are typically victims of hunger that goes well into the summer break.

Kids who struggle with issues of hunger are also more anxious and aggressive. Teenagers who rarely get enough to eat are more likely to be suspended from school and also have a more difficult time getting along with other kids. Historically, children who are raised without receiving consistent and reliable healthy meals tend to suffer potential long-term effects that contribute to the improper mental and physical development of those children.

Also, low-income children are at an increased risk to fall victim to obesity during summer vacation, with some children gaining weight two to three times faster than during the regular school year, because they turn to unhealthy packaged alternatives that are easily found at

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corner stores and small convenience stops.

During the regular school year, millions of low-income students rely on free and reduced breakfasts and lunches, yet during the summer months those same students fail to take advantage of the meal options available through the Summer Nutrition Programs provided by the Texas Department of Agriculture.

In recent years, Summer Nutrition Programs have struggled to meet the needs of many children because of recession-related funding cuts to summer schools and to summer programs that serve summer meals, in turn limiting their capacity to feed low-income children. The 2012 year saw the first increase in Summer Nutrition Program participation since July 2008, increasing by 13,000 students, or 0.5 percent.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Department of Food and Nutrition Services and the Texas Department of Agriculture are responsible for administering an underutilized program to address the issue of hunger in Texas, and while participation has increased since 2012, many eligible students are not taking advantage of the program benefits and the free meals offered to families who qualify. The program, called the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), was created to ensure that low-income children continue to receive nutritious meals each day, while their normal school is not in session.

The Summer Food Service Program was established in 1968 as an amendment to the National School Lunch Act of 1946, a U.S. Federal Law signed by President Harry S. Truman to provide low cost or free school lunch meals to qualified students. Today, the Summer Food Service Program is the largest federal resource available for local sponsors who want to combine a child nutrition program with a summer activity program.

For every 100 low-income children in Texas, who received free or reduced lunch during the 2012 school year, only 11 children took advantage of the meals offered at free nutrition program sites across Texas last summer. Even in the poorest and hungriest of communities across Texas, less than 12 percent of the children and families eligible for the nutrition-based programs actually took advantage of it. Parents across the Greater Houston area need more information about these programs and should know what school districts and community centers serve as sites for these nutrition-based summer meal programs, so that the children who qualify for free or reduced school lunch during the regular school year won't go hungry during these three critical summer months.

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There are many non-profits, faith-based organizations and day camps who serve as feeding sites for the program, along with units of local government, such as city parks and recreational departments. Other organizations and entities, including for-profit business, can also participate in the program as a feeding site by contacting the Texas Department of Agriculture.

There are many new tools this year for families to locate the free summer meal sites across the Greater Houston area. To find out which site is closest to you, call 1-866-3-HUNGRY and a live operator will tell you where the closest site to you, serving free nutritious summer meals is located. You can also text FOOD-T-X to the number 877-877 or visit [www.whyhunger.org/findfood](http://www.whyhunger.org/findfood) to locate the sites using an online map.

Hunger, especially childhood hunger, is something that needs to be eradicated across the Greater Houston area. The Houston Forward Times is happy to be on the front lines of addressing an issue as important as Childhood Hunger in Houston and will continue to provide relevant and timely information to help address the issue until it is eradicated for good.