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Food bank programs fight child hunger with healthy foods

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By Sarah Barr — sbarr@newsobserver.com

RALEIGH — On pasta day at the Homework Haven Kids Cafe, the staff lines the kitchen counter with paper plates of spaghetti with ground beef and tomato sauce, tossed salad and toasted bagels as they wait for three dozen children to come through the wooden double doors.

When the children arrive, the smallest of them bob on tiptoe to see over the counter while teenagers who've long since grown taller than the staff crack jokes as they wait their turns in line. They then settle in to eat at folding tables scattered throughout the Raleigh Safety & Community Club.

The after-school program is a place where children can do their homework, take field trips and participate in a garden club and other activities. And critically, it's a place where they can always find a hot, nutritious meal, an important guarantee for a group of children who may not always have access to the kinds of food they need most.

While their needs vary, the children generally come from lower-income families, and the meals they receive at the Kids Cafe are an important supplement to what they eat during the rest of the day, said Jeanne Tedrow, the chief executive officer of Passage Home, a community development organization that runs the after-school program.

"It's an opportunity to be well-fed before you go to bed," she said.



Counselor-in-training JaQuilla Suell, 14, checks out the garden at the Raleigh Safety & Community Club with Joni Craven-Jeffries. The center uses the garden as a teaching tool. **SHANE SNIDER** — shane@shanesnider.com



About Feed the Need

Feed the Need is The N&O's annual community service project that raises money and collects food donations to help the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina fight

The program is just one of the ways that public



and private groups in the Triangle are combating a range of risks and realities that fall under the heading of child hunger. There is a two-fold effort: making sure children have enough to eat and that their meals are nutritious.

The Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina, which supports 26 Kids Cafe programs in partnership with community organizations, says more than 560,000 people in its 34-county service area are at risk for hunger because they live in poverty. Of those, about 191,000 are children. A single person

with an annual income of \$11,170 or less or a family of four with an annual income of \$23,050 or less meet the criteria for poverty used to arrive at those numbers.

But Peter Werbicki, the president and chief executive officer of the food bank, said those figures don't capture the full scope of the problem. Families with incomes above the official poverty line also are struggling to consistently put adequate food on the table. They include those families hit hard by the recession that may never have anticipated struggling to provide food.

"I think the recession has put a new face on hunger at many levels," Werbicki said.

When the recession hit, the number of people seeking help from the food bank increased. The numbers have yet to return to pre-recession levels – and children are swept up in those changes, he added.

The federal Census Bureau reported that 16.4 percent of Wake County children up to age 18 lived in poverty in 2011. The rate was 27.2 percent in Durham County, 21.7 percent in Johnston County and 16.8 percent in Orange County. In North Carolina overall, the rate of child poverty was 25.4 percent.

In addition to its Kid Cafes, the food bank runs programs that send children at risk for hunger home with backpacks full of food on the weekend or that offer meals during the summer when kids do not have access to school breakfasts or lunches. Overall, the food bank works with 800 partner organizations to distribute about 50 million pounds of food each year to people who need it.

Effect on children

At the national and state level, the federal Department of Agriculture collects data about families' access to food, but they don't use the word hunger to describe their findings. Instead, they use the terms "food secure" and "food insecure."

Food secure households are those with consistent access throughout the year to adequate food for active healthy living for everyone in the household. Food insecure households lack that access at some point during the year.

Within the food insecure category, "low food security" household's members have enough food but deploy coping strategies such as reducing the variety, quality or desirability of the food they eat or using food assistance programs or local food pantries. "Very low food security" households have members who reduce portions or skip meals because they don't have enough food.

In the United States, 8.6 million children lived in households in which both children and adults were considered food insecure in 2011, according to the USDA. Children usually are shielded from reductions in how much they eat, even in households where adults have very low food security, but that year about 1 percent of children lived in households where the very low food security designation extended even to them.

The amount of food that children have to eat and the quality of that food can have significant effects on their lives.

Sara Benjamin Neelon, an assistant professor at Duke University Medical Center, said children who have very low food security – the kind when they don't eat enough calories – are at risk for malnutrition if the problem persists. They may experience both physical and developmental delays.

childhood hunger.

One in four children in our community will go hungry tonight, and your support of Feed the Need can make a difference for them. The food bank's Kids Meals and More program includes the Kids Cafe, which provides nutritious after-school meals; Weekend Powerpacks, in which kids take home enough food for their weekend nutrition; and Kids Summer Meals, breakfast and lunch for kids who depend on school meals.

You can contribute nonperishable food at your neighborhood Harris Teeter through Saturday, April 20, or give by mail or online. Donate online by visiting feedtheneednc.com. Mail checks payable to Food Bank/Feed the Need to Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina, 3808 Tarheel Drive, Raleigh, NC 27609. Gifts of any amount are appreciated and tax deductible.

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In the United States, that kind of chronic malnutrition is rare, but children in less dire situations still can encounter serious problems, Benjamin Neelon said.

Children who haven't had enough to eat can have trouble focusing in school, which can disrupt their academic progress. Imagine trying to learn long division or write an essay with the headache or irritability that can come with hunger. Or children may be dealing with the stress of wondering just when they will get their next meal.

In contrast, studies have shown that a healthy diet – one with adequate calories that also are nutritious – can enhance cognitive functioning.

An nutritious diet

From the employees at the food bank to community organizers to researchers, everyone stresses the importance of making sure children get healthy food. They don't want children eating empty calories or overloading on salt and fat.



Benjamin Neelon and her students volunteer with the weekend backpack program at a Durham elementary school. She said people can help by making donations of food such as beans, rice, tuna and fruits or vegetables, rather than snacks or prepackaged foods.

At the food bank, the staff incorporates as many fresh fruits and vegetables into the food they distribute as possible and hope to do even more in the future, Werbicki said.

He added that food donations always are needed.

"Unfortunately, it's still going out the door as quickly as ever," he said.

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