

The Boston Globe

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STEAM WEAVER

TODAY: Humid, a mix of sun and clouds. High 79-84.

TOMORROW: A.M. fog gives way to patchy clouds. High 85-90.

HIGH TIDE: 10:29 a.m., 10:34 p.m.

SUNRISE: 5:39 SUNSET: 8:01

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PHOTOS BY BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF

Maureen Foreman handed out food at New Jerusalem Baptist Church in Framingham, which offers free lunches.

An unwanted summer break

More families miss free school lunch

By Tara Ballenger
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Many low-income children living in suburban communities such as Framingham, Northbridge, Norwood, and Waltham do not have access to federally-funded free lunch programs during school vacation, even as the recession has increased the number of families needing help.

The program is intended to ensure that children who get free lunches at school don't go hungry during the summer, but in recent years just one in five Massachusetts children in the school lunch program have also been served in the summer, according to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The problem is twofold, antihun-



'Groceries are not inexpensive, especially when you try to buy healthy food.'

CARLA DOMINGUEZ (ABOVE)

Making lunch for sons Steven (front) and Carlos, who formerly had access to a subsidized lunch program

ger activists say: In most cases, the government pays for the feeding locations only in neighborhoods where more than half the children are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches; and the federal government pays so little per meal that the food programs often operate at a loss. Making up the difference is becoming harder for public schools and social service programs with tight budgets.

Framingham, for example, closed one of its three free meal sites this summer because the district could no longer afford to pay for air conditioning and janitorial services in the school that housed the program.

Carla Dominguez lives within walking distance of that school, Woodrow Wilson Elementary, and her two boys, now 14 and 15, in past summers would eat lunch there several times a week.

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Many miss out on summer lunch

► LUNCH PROGRAM

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"It helped keep my food budget down," said Dominguez, a single mother who works part time in a retail store. Her hours were cut recently, reducing an already-stretched income.

"Groceries are not inexpensive, especially when you try to buy healthy food," she said.

Statewide, 4,600 more children qualified for free and reduced lunches in the 2007-2008 school year than in the year before. Yet 300 fewer children were served in the summer lunch program in 2008 than during summer 2007, according to the Food Research and Action Center, a research and advocacy group in Washington, D.C., which used numbers provided by the US Department of Agriculture. Data for this year are not yet available.

A shortage of sites in the suburbs is a major factor in eroding the number served. In metropolitan Boston, 35 percent of the children who receive subsidized meals during the school year do not live in an area that qualifies for federal reimbursement for a summer food program, said Alan Berube, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington. Most of those children live outside Boston and Cambridge.

The Summer Food Service Program is set to be reauthorized by Congress this fall, and the advocates are lobbying lawmakers to make it more accessible.

When the program was created in 1975, only 33 percent of the



BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF

With the aid of their granddaughter Lacey Ann Nelson, Winston and Maureen Foreman run a free bag-lunch program at New Jerusalem Baptist Church in Framingham twice a week.

children in a neighborhood had to be low-income for a school or other feeding location to qualify for federal funding. In 1981, that was changed to 50 percent to save money, and the next year participation dropped by 25 percent, or half a million children, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

"It is extremely difficult for suburban and rural areas that don't meet the 50 percent threshold to provide food for children

in hunger," said Crystal FitzSimons, director of school and out-of-school time programs at Washington's Food Research and Action Center. It is lobbying Congress to lower the rate to 40 percent.

In the current budget climate, funding a program expansion can be very difficult. The Democratic chairman and top Republican on the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry have expressed their

support for child nutrition programs in general, but neither would comment on the specifics of the reauthorization because it hasn't been discussed yet.

In Framingham, where more than one in three children qualify for free meals, a nonprofit organization that had sponsored feeding sites bowed out this year. Brendan Ryan, food services director for the Framingham Public Schools, said he cobbled together \$15,000 in grants to keep

this summer's feeding program going, but that wasn't enough to operate all the sites, though lunches also are being provided at local YMCA camps.

"We can't feed everyone," Ryan said. "At some point you have to say, 'that's all.'"

Suburban poverty can be deceptive, said Jeff Kirk, lieutenant of the Salvation Army in Framingham.

"It's not a typical ghetto, and it doesn't look like an impoverished place, but the need is still here," he said.

The Salvation Army runs a food pantry and offers free dinners to the community through its Miracle Kitchen, which is staffed entirely by volunteers. It used to offer lunches year-round along with the town's Civic League, but budget cuts ended both programs last fall.

In Waltham, 40 percent, or 1,900, of the students are on free and reduced-price lunches during the school year. However, only one of the city's nine schools meets the 50 percent eligibility criteria. As a result, all four of Waltham's summer drop-in lunch sites are within 1.5 miles of each other, with none in the rest of the city.

Northbridge is one of several communities where no single school meets the 50 percent eligibility requirement. Though nearly 25 percent of Northbridge children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches during the school year, the town has no summer food program.

"I seriously cannot stand the

fact that there are hungry and underfed children in my own community," said Laurie Sabourin, program coordinator at Northbridge's Blackstone Valley United Methodist Church Peace of Bread Community Kitchen. "It is a real issue, and sadly for the most part not really acknowledged for the problem it is."

Peace of Bread has been serving dinners for six years. After seeing an increase in child hunger, it started serving lunches one day a week last year. This year, the program was expanded to three days a week, with up to 90 children coming each day.

Though Peace of Bread receives money and volunteers from many churches in town, Sabourin said, "we do not reach as many children and families as we would like, simply because many of those in the most need do not have the transportation to get to our lunches or dinners."

In Norwood, another community without a summer food program for children, social service worker Aislynn Rodeghiero seven years ago founded Abundant Table, a nonprofit group that feeds about 100 people each day.

"Suburban poverty is something that's hidden," she said. "But if you take a little time to look beyond the nice houses and nice cars and fancy restaurants, it's there."

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AN UNWANTED SUMMER BREAK by Tara Ballenger

While I wouldn't say that this story is the best story that I wrote for the Globe, it is the one I am most proud of. It took several weeks to report, and the process of getting the information and the sources was challenging. I had to work with state and local agencies to get the statistics about school lunches, but what I really needed was local sources to tell the story. I spent several days roaming the streets of Framingham, Massachusetts, looking for people who were affected by cuts to the summer nutrition program. I went to the Salvation Army, who told me of other churches who helped feed hungry families, and the network of sources developed from there. After finding parents who were struggling to put food on the table, the big challenge arose: who will let me put their story in the paper? Financial difficulties are such a personal matter, and people rarely want their problems aired to thousands of readers. With a lot of looking and a little coaxing, I was able to get one mother to let me use her name and story in the article, and even to get a photo. That, combined with the quotes of church volunteers who were on the front lines of helping needy families, really made the story in my opinion. I was also thrilled when this story--which highlights hunger, an issue that's very important to me--was chosen to run on the front page of the Globe.

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