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Providing nourishing meals for youth during the summer

Sharing gratitude for the Foodbank, its school partners, and volunteers

By Dr. Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

Most people who envision Santa Barbara County first think of its bounty: the beauty, architecture, and rich cultural traditions. Less known are the challenges faced by many in our communities every day. Poverty and hunger are abundant for an alarmingly high number of our neighbors and their children.

In fact, Santa Barbara County ranks third among California's 58 counties for the percentage of children in poverty, trailing only Los Angeles and Santa Cruz, according to the Public Policy Institute of California. Let that sink in for a minute.

There's more: One in four residents of Santa Barbara County receives assistance from the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County annually and 39 percent of those served are children. The majority of the services are provided in Santa Maria (47%), with another 24% in Santa Barbara and 12% in Lompoc.

We all know that young bodies and developing minds need nutritious meals to function and thrive. Schools are well aware that it is hard for a child to focus on their ABCs, the square root of 64, or the freedoms conferred by our Bill of Rights, when a stomach is hurting from the sharp pangs of hunger.

We are grateful for our schools, which provide healthy breakfasts, lunches, and other meals to qualifying students through the free and reduced meal program during the school year. These consistent, reliable, nutritious meals support a healthy mind and body, and also help build community through engaging activities.

But during the summer, when most school programs are closed, the steady access to a nutritious meal stops being offered in the usual ways.

Thankfully, the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County and its 300 organizational partners are there to help fill this gap, along with several school partners. For example, Santa Barbara Unified School District (SBUSD) serves meals at 38 sites during the summer while the Foodbank supports another 17 locations with its Picnic in the Park program. Between the two, meals are served in a variety of ways including cafeterias, out of the SBUSD's mobile food trucks, and in other settings through partnerships with nonprofit organizations.

The Foodbank's Picnic in the Park program offers youth under 18 a free meal at 11 sites in north Santa Barbara County and six sites in south county. The program provides food and fun activities that encourage play and movement while sharing nutrition education at the same time. Last year, the program served more than 39,000 meals to our county's children.

The Foodbank also offers a Kids' Farmers Market at 23 after-school programs countywide, providing fresh produce, nutrition education, cooking, and basic recipes the children can share at home. The Teens Love Cooking program educates students on how to cook healthy, plant-rich meals. These programs, and others like them, are important because they provide meals and also teach the students cooking and healthy eating habits, coupling the short-term need for food with skills that can be applied throughout their lives.

The Foodbank of Santa Barbara County distributes more than 10 million pounds of food each year. One-half of it is fresh produce. Local growers help fill this need, along with individuals whose backyards are producing more fruit than they can use. They share their backyard bounties with those in need.

None of this would be possible without the more than 2,100 volunteers who give their time to help end hunger. These volunteers sort groceries and pack bags at the warehouses, deliver food to home-bound seniors, teach students how to cook, and harvest fresh fruit and vegetables from private gardens and orchards.

We thank the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County for its excellent work helping to fill the critical need of eliminating hunger for our students and their families. And we thank the school partners, volunteers, and community organizations that help make this possible. These efforts are making real differences for our youth and their families.

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