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New law promotes summer meals for kids

During the school year, tens of thousands of New Jersey children rely on school meals for the nutrition they need to be healthy and learn. In the summer, hunger sets in when these meals are not available and families struggle to put food on the table. A new state law now promises to give thousands more New Jersey students this critical summertime nutrition.

The Federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides funds to schools, local government and community organizations to serve meals to children 18 years and younger during the summer. The program is funded through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and administered on the state level by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA).

A growing number of New Jersey communities are serving free meals to children in the summer at schools, parks, libraries and other places where kids congregate. Still, many communities are failing to take advantage of this federally-funded child nutrition program – and the federal dollars available to feed children. This new law will ensure that summer meals are available in high-poverty communities across New Jersey.

Under the new law, which was enacted in May 2018, high-poverty school districts must participate in SFSP. Roughly 150 New Jersey school districts that did not sponsor a summer meals program in 2018 may be subject to this new requirement.

Key provisions of the legislation include:

- Every school district in which 50 percent or more of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals as of Oct. 16 of the preceding school year must become a SFSP sponsor or site.

- Schools districts must participate by summer 2019, unless they are granted a waiver by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.
- The department may grant a waiver for one year if a district lacks the staff, facilities or equipment to become a sponsor or lacks the means to finance the hiring or acquisition of such staff, facilities or equipment.
- The department may also grant a waiver for one year to a school district if a different sponsor currently operates the program within the same community.
- A school district that requests a waiver must report to NJDA its reasons for requesting a waiver, including a description of the specific impediments to implementing the program and actions that could be taken to remove those barriers or, where applicable, the identification of the sponsor that currently operates the program within the same community.
- By summer 2020, all districts must become an SFSP sponsor or a site.
- The department typically holds trainings for sponsors in January of each year. Organizations, including school districts, can apply to become a sponsor until March of each year.

Who pays for summer meals?

The federal government reimburses sponsors for each qualified meal served. When participation increases, so do federal dollars claimed. In fact, in 2017, New Jersey communities collected \$11 million in federal funds to feed kids in the summer. That represents an encouraging 49 percent increase since summer 2015, according to USDA data. For information on participating, contact the New Jersey Department of Agriculture at (609) 292-4498.

Find resources for implementing summer meals at njfoodforthought.org. For help organizing local coalitions to implement summer meals and other child nutrition programs, contact Lisa Pitz at lpitz@cfanj.org. This document was prepared by Hunger Free New Jersey. Visit hungerfreenj.org to learn more.

