

Kids face 'summer hunger gap'

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Advocates seek CalFresh funding boost

Stephen Vargas, 8, and his sister Desiree Rodriguez, 2, are lucky kids.

Their mom Miranda Rodriguez knows how to cook fresh vegetables in ways that delight them. And their mom also is able to get to The Resource Connection Food Bank in San Andreas when the family food budget runs short at times because “a car breaks down or a root canal is needed,” she said.

On a recent Friday, the two were even able to get out into the Food Bank garden to pick some squash and basil.

But for hundreds of other Calaveras County children – the exact number is uncertain – summer is a hungry time. An analysis released last week by California Food Policy Advocates estimated that there are 881 children in Calaveras County who fall into what the group calls the “summer nutrition gap.”

The study calculated the number of children who receive free- and reduced-price lunches at school and who don't have access to any similar nutrition program during the summer, based on data from the California Department of Education.

Jeanne Hayward, director of The Resource Connection Food Bank, said she thinks the study probably under-counts the number of children in the county who don't get enough nutritious food during the summer.

“I would say last year it was double that, from my numbers,” Hayward said.

Last year, the Food Bank served 6,299 Calaveras County residents, including 1,925 children, Hayward said.

The year before that, the Food Bank conducted a survey of its clients and found that more than three quarters of them had skipped meals or cut back on food in order to pay other bills. Hayward said that often parents will go without food in an effort to provide more to their children.



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Stephen Vargas, 8, harvests basil Friday at The Resource Connection Emergency Food Bank garden in San Andreas while his sister Desiree Rodriguez and mother Miranda Rodriguez look on.

California Food Policy Advocates issued its breakdown of the so-called “summer hunger gap” for California counties to promote passage in Congress of the Stop Child Summer Hunger Act of 2015.

The act would temporarily increase the value of electronic benefit transfer(EBT) cards for families receiving nutrition benefits while school is not in session. Advocates say tests of the program done in other states succeeded in reducing child summer hunger.

Calaveras County leaders who work with hungry families also like the idea.

“Of course more money on their EBT card would be beneficial to help them buy more food,” said Kathy Houle, program manager of eligibility for Calaveras County Health and Human Services.

Houle said that this month there are 2,782 households in Calaveras County receiving CalFresh, the current name of the governmental food subsidy program formerly known as food stamps.

Hayward also believes that the EBT card strategy is a good way to get nutritious food to children during the summer. “That is the true safety net for families for food,” she said.

Giving children enough nutritious food can reduce their consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, say those who operate nutrition programs.

Calaveras County has been in the forefront of efforts to increase access to fresh fruit and vegetables for low-income families. This summer, for example, the Angels Camp Farmers Market that operates on Friday evenings in Utica Park is accepting EBT cards to pay for produce.

The Food Bank also has programs to encourage produce consumption, including produce days held the second Fridays of each month. Houle called such programs “a fabulous way for families to make it through the summer.”

In the case of Stephen and Desiree, they are not just making it through the summer but thriving, as evidenced by their healthy skin, bright eyes and energy.

Rodriguez said that her five-member family is well nourished in part thanks to efforts by the Food Bank.

“The fresh fruits and vegetables here are a blessing,” she said.