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Filling the nutritional gap for kids

By KEELEY CHISM

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With the end of the school year comes the end of easy access to lunch for many students in Petaluma and across the state. According to an annual report by the nonprofit California Food Policy Advocates, 80 percent of low-income youth who normally rely on the free lunches served on campus during the school year were deprived of these meals during the summer of 2013.



Rachel Simpson/For the Argus-Courier
Alina Ruys, 3, and Cadence, 5, Ruys dig in to their meals at the free lunch program at Logan Place on Friday, June 6, 2014.

It's a problem that the Redwood Empire Food Bank takes on every summer. For the last 11 years, the food bank has provided families with the nutritional lunches that they normally relied on at school. The program extends to eight cities across the county, with 48 total locations offering free lunches, eight of which are in Petaluma.

"Last summer we fed about 200 children a day in Petaluma," said Vanessa Wallace, community programs coordinator for the food bank, which sends out staff to oversee a majority of the programs. "Only one of our locations is volunteer-based; Logan Place on Petaluma Boulevard has six volunteers."

The food bank expects to supply 30,000 low-income children a healthy lunch as well as provide fun summer activities. One of the sites in Petaluma, at Miwok Elementary, offers a summer camp for children in addition to the free lunches. Meals are served from June through August on a drop-in basis.

Jessica Castaneda took her cousins to the program after their mother learned about it through flyers from Miwok Elementary and banners posted around the school.

"They kept asking me to take them. They always love it," said Castaneda on Monday as her young cousins devoured the boxed lunches. "They like to eat things they don't normally get. They love the food."

Nutrition is of the utmost importance to the Redwood Empire Food Bank. Lunches include a main dish with healthy sides like fresh fruit or carrot sticks, along with a serving of milk. Whenever possible, the food bank tries to take advantage of the seasonal supplies.

"Since it's summer, we utilize the fresh produce available, as well as whole grains. It's something we pride ourselves on," said Wallace. "With the program, we strive to have nutrition in the meals. We also try to offer new foods, something the kids haven't tried before."

Elizabeth Lavezzoli, a staff member with Redwood Empire Food Bank, hopes to spread the word about the free meals offered in most neighborhoods in Sonoma

County during the summer months.

“I think more people would come if more people knew about it,” said Lavezzoli. “It’s important to get the word out, through flyers, posters and even radio blasts. The kids that do come love it; they like the variety of everything they get.”

The opening week for the Miwok Elementary site fed an average of 27 kids; most of whom were also part of the summer camp offered at the school.

While most of the Petaluma locations focus on supplying lunch, one site, at the Boys & Girls Club at Lucchesi Park, also offers breakfast to local families. Although the program has been running for over a decade, this summer is one of many firsts, including the addition of a summer camp at Miwok.

“We can only estimate how many kids will benefit based on last year,” said Wallace. “Some of the locations are new, so it’s hard to say how many children we will feed this summer.”

(Contact Keeley Chism at argus@arguscourier.com).

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