

LONG ISLAND / TOWNS

Farmingdale Women's Club gathers food for students over winter break



Club member Linda Hayes, left, of Farmingdale, fills a bag held by volunteer Kerry Zaino, of East Meadow, as fellow volunteer Andres Rivera, of Westbury, watches on Tuesday at the Farmingdale Public Library. Credit: Rick Kopstein

By Joseph Ostapiuk

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When school breaks for winter recess, some students will hope for snowy days and sledding. Others, however, will worry about their next meal.

The Farmingdale Women's Club, a philanthropic group, for a second year gathered food from the community in a partnership with the school district to distribute meals to children who typically rely on school breakfast and lunch. The effort, "Operation Shut the Door on Hunger," is part of a patchwork effort to help feed children when class isn't in session.

Farmingdale public schools and many others across Long Island are on a weeklong break starting Monday, Presidents Day.

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“There’s a tremendous amount of school districts on Long Island, and each school district really stands on their own in terms of identifying and then serving those children who are food insecure,” said Jessica Rosati, vice president for programs and community services for Long Island Cares, a nonprofit serving Nassau and Suffolk counties.

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **As students' winter break approaches**, the Farmingdale Women’s Club gathered food in a partnership with the school district for children who typically rely on school breakfast and lunch.
- **Nearly 1 in 5 children nationally** in 2023 lived in homes where it was uncertain if there would be enough food to meet the needs of everyone in their family, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said.
- **Long Island Cares estimates 45,000 children** on Long Island are food insecure, according to the nonprofit’s website.

Nearly 1 in 5 children nationally in 2023 lived in homes where it was uncertain if there would be enough food to meet the needs of everyone in their family, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said. Long Island Cares estimates 45,000 children on Long Island are food insecure, according to the nonprofit’s website.

The women’s club gathered 34 totes of food and hundreds of dollars in gift cards at the Farmingdale Public Library that on Tuesday were passed on to social workers from the Farmingdale school district, which enrolls approximately 5,100 students. That food and monetary support will then be distributed to in-need students, said Tina Diamond, chair of the club’s community impact program.

“During that week that the schools are off, at least they have cereal, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, tuna fish,” Diamond said. “At least they have something to eat.”



Volunteer Julia Leogrande, of Wantagh, creates note cards to put in the bags for the children. Credit: Rick Kopstein

Robust community support

Diamond said the group started the program last year and was met with robust community support. The club was initially only accepting donations on Fridays at the library, but additional days were needed for residents to drop off supplies, she said.

Soon, the library began accepting donations every day.

Library Director Christa Lucarelli said the facility often gets a firsthand look at food insecurity and those who are just looking to get shelter for a few hours, highlighting the need for the program.

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"This is great that the women's club does this for the families and has partnered with the social workers to make sure that these baskets of food get to the families," Lucarelli said in an interview.

A school district's eligibility to receive support when school isn't in session often doesn't present the entire picture of food insecurity in individual schools, Rosati, of Long Island Cares, said.

Only one school in the Farmingdale district has more than half of its students qualify for free or reduced lunch, which is the metric to qualify for weekend food support, according to Rosati.

"We find that a lot on Long Island, where you have these schools that may not have that 50% rate or above of children in need, and unfortunately, those schools don't get support," Rosati said.

Still, Long Island Cares data from January shows three contractors of the nonprofit served 639 households in the Farmingdale area, Rosati said, with Long Island Cares directly serving 527 Farmingdale children.

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Gov. Kathy Hochul in her State of the State address last month pitched a plan to provide free breakfast and lunch to all New York students, regardless of their income. Currently, the Community Eligibility Provision program mandates universal free meals for school districts where 25% of the school population either receives free or reduced lunch.

Just because a high percentage of the community doesn't receive free or reduced lunch, "that doesn't mean that there are kids that are not in need – there absolutely is," Rosati said.

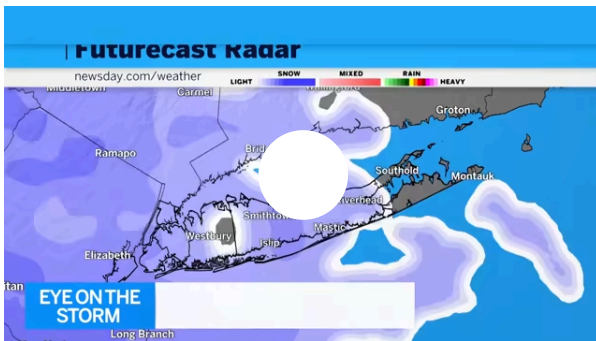
That's where organizations and food banks "bridge those gaps," she said.



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