

USDA program helps feed LI kids

Relieves burden of food insecurity during summer

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Summer months can be stressful for families who rely on meals in school.

When school is not in session, tens of thousands of Long Island children who face food insecurity can be left without a place to eat, a growing need that local food banks and school districts are trying to meet through the help of a federally funded program.

"We need to meet the basic needs of our children," said Kim Skillen, deputy superintendent for instruction at North Babylon schools. "They're with us for 180-plus days during the school year. But in July and August, they still need to eat."

Long Island youth can access free meals at dozens of sites in Nassau and Suffolk counties in the coming weeks

as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Summer Food Service Program.

Officials from the state Education Department, which administers the program on the state level, estimated the initiative will serve more than 20 million meals to feed 400,000 youth statewide through nearly 2,500 sites over the summer.

Families can search for a location that offers meals on an interactive USDA map. They can also text their ZIP code to 304304 to get information on the nearest sites.

Locally, the program is run by approved sponsors, including school districts like Brentwood, and food banks like Long Island Cares and Island Harvest.

The two regional food banks collectively run 59 sites, including a dozen open to the public for anyone 18 or younger. The rest are restricted to only children who participate in summer programs. A monthlong summer camp in Glen Cove, for example, is one of the sites that receives breakfast and lunch from Long Island Cares.

On Wednesday, dozens of students at Connolly Elementary

School in Glen Cove had their choice of applesauce, oatmeal bars, cereal, crackers, diced pears or peaches and milk for breakfast.

Children sat along tables in a cafeteria cooled by fans standing in the corners. A few rising third-graders talked about an upcoming field trip. Two 8-year-old girls disagreed over whether they wanted to rock climb.

Carolina Di Maggio, youth program coordinator of Glen Cove After 3, said the city-run program doesn't have the funding to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students every day. The program runs from July 8 through Aug. 9 and has about 90 children ages 5 through 14.

While some children may have breakfast at home before they come, others need the meals, Di Maggio said. "Some of the kids may not get dinner at home," she said.

With rising costs, the need is greater than ever, some food advocates said.

"We are seeing the need expanding beyond what we've ever seen in the past," said Jenny Schaeffer, chief programs



A child has breakfast Wednesday at a school in North Babylon.

and network officer at Island Harvest.

"Food is so much more expensive," she said. "[For] families who have children at home, their expenses have increased in all kinds of directions."

Families can find meals in schools, libraries, churches and community centers during certain hours. One of them is the William E. DeLuca Jr. Elementary School in North Babylon, which opened Monday.

Skillen said the district began the program in summer 2020 during the height of the pandemic. The program initially allowed for grab-and-go meals, but last year, regulations changed and required children to have meals on-site.

Skillen said the program, which operates Monday through Friday, averages about

30 to 50 children daily.

Just a few miles away, Wanda Ortiz-Rivera, superintendent of Brentwood schools, said her district runs four sites open to community members 18 or younger.

Last summer, the district offered more than 66,000 meals for breakfast and lunch. Many of those who were fed were district students enrolled in summer programs.

"We do recognize the impact food insecurity may have on some students," Ortiz-Rivera said. "It's critical that we ensure they have a nutritious meal during the summer months."

An estimated 44,780 children in Nassau and Suffolk counties were food insecure in 2022, according to Feeding America, a national network of food banks, food pantries and local meal programs.

Health care directory for LGBTQ community

BY ROBERT BRODSKY

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Members of Long Island's LGBTQ community who have felt mistreated by health care providers because of their gender or sexual identity will soon be able to access an online directory of medical providers considered safe and accessible.

The LGBT Health Access Program is designed to give lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals confidence their medical provider will treat and meet their needs, LGBT Network chief executive Robert Vitelli said Wednesday.

"We know from experience that one negative experience from an LGBTQ person accessing services can really set them back a lifetime," said Vitelli said during a news con-



The LGBT Network's Ernesto Hernandez speaks to trainees.

ference at the group's Hauptpage office to announce the online directory.

"That one negative experience," Vitelli added, "could mean they never go back and access these services, including

... primary health care."

In addition to a free directory of health care providers, the program will provide online training and education to participating providers — the first such seminar began Wednesday — and a health fair bringing patients and physicians together. The network already publishes a directory of businesses friendly to the LGBTQ community.

Nearly three dozen health care groups and social service-based nonprofits have already signed up for the training, Vitelli said.

A 2022 survey, conducted by Stony Brook Medicine, said 37% of respondents — including 60% of transgender people — reported mistreatment by health care providers and said they'd been treated "disrespectfully or

in a non-affirming way" by a provider or office staff. Two-thirds of respondents said they experienced verbal harassment because of their gender or sexual identity, and nearly 32% experienced physical harassment.

Nationwide, LGBTQ people are more than twice as likely as heterosexual people to have a mental health disorder in their lifetimes, and 2½ times more likely to experience depression, anxiety or substance misuse, according to the American Psychiatric Association.

"The communities that we serve are already struggling with so many issues and so many obstacles that this should not be another roadblock in their recovery or their road to healing," said Andrea Ramos-Topper, division director of children's services at the EAC Net-

work, a nonprofit social service agency based in Garden City.

Krista Whitman, senior vice president and chief operating officer at the Outreach Development Corporation, a Brentwood nonprofit that provides drug, alcohol and mental health treatment, said the needs of the LGBTQ+ community continue to rise in New York State.

"It is critical that we form alliances and partnerships to address those needs and increase accessibility to reduce barriers to care for this community," Whitman said.

Stony Brook, Northwell Health and NYU Langone health care systems were each recently designated as LGBTQ+ Healthcare Equality Leaders by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, the nation's largest LGBTQ+ advocacy group.