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STATE DEPARTMENT WORKS TO FEED KIDS IN THE SUMMER

(BOISE) -- Across Idaho, children who rely during the school year on school lunch and breakfast programs for what might be their only nutritious meal of the day, often still have that need when the summer break begins.

“Hunger doesn’t take a vacation,” said Angela Kraft, the Idaho State Department of Education’s Summer Food Service Program coordinator.

The department oversees the federal funds used by both the various free and reduced lunch programs provided by Idaho school districts and the Summer Food Service Program. Nationally, more than 32 million children eat school lunches daily when school is in session, and about half receive meals free or at a reduced price.

“You’ll often hear government officials use the phrase ‘food and nutrition insecurity.’ But what we’re really talking about are families that simply don’t have the resources to provide three nutritious meals a day for their children,” Kraft said.

“During the school year, through the federal free and reduced lunch programs, Idaho schools help make sure every child has the opportunity for at least one good, nutritious meal a day. But hunger doesn’t go away when school is out, which is why school districts and private groups all across the state have stepped up to provide meals to children who need them during the summer break,” Kraft said, explaining the basic purpose behind the Summer Food Service Program.

Last year the summer food program saw 77 sponsors serve 1.29 million meals at 323 sites in Idaho. But that’s not enough for Kraft. Only one in six children that receive free or reduced meals during the school year receive meals through the summer program, “which means we still have a long way to go in ensuring our kids are fed year-round,” she said.

“The benefits of good nutrition are not just physical, but social, emotional and intellectual. Children with reliable access to good nutrition are set up for



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success to return to school in the fall ready to learn,” Kraft pointed out. Studies have repeatedly shown that hungry children often have trouble focusing in school and their grades suffer as a result. In addition, students with adequate nutrition have been shown to be able to learn more effectively.

Earlier this year, the State Department of Education put out a call for school districts or other organizations to administer and run the summer food programs. The program meal sites range from school cafeterias to city parks. Many of the school districts combine the program with summer school, although all of the programs at any site offer free meals to all children in the community, ages 1-18, no questions asked.

Besides helping with nutrition, “Feeding sites offer a sense of community and foster positive social engagement among participants,” Kraft said.

Many of the sponsors also offer programs to go with the daily meals, from crafts to story times. In fact, the State Department currently is working with the Idaho Commission for Libraries to use some of the program sites for literacy promotion efforts during the summer months. Some libraries even serve as meal sites and others send staff to read to the children or to direct other literacy-related activities at program sites.

To help sponsors provide the most effective programs to serve Idaho’s children in need, and to make sure they meet all the federal requirements, including providing meals that meet federal nutrition standards, Kraft and the State Department of Education are offering a series of workshops around the state in April. Although mandatory for sponsors who have already signed up for the program, Kraft said some of the participants are using the workshop sessions to decide if they can or want to sponsor a program. “We can never have enough people participate,” she said.

The workshops will be held at the Holiday Inn in Boise on April 9- 10, in Fruitland at the Fruitland School District on April 13, in Twin Falls at the Holiday Inn Express on April 14-15, and in Lewiston at the Red Lion Lewiston on April 21-22. All sessions are from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The final deadline to apply for participation as a sponsor in the summer food program is May 1. Those interested should contact Kraft at akraft@sde.idaho.gov, or by calling her at (208) 332-6819.

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(A list of participants who have signed up to sponsor summer food programs is attached to this e-mail, along with two “generic” photographs, one of students receiving a meal in a traditional cafeteria setting and the other of a child receiving a meal in a city park)