

Working to protect young from going hungry

As a member of the Washington County Hunger Council, I have had the opportunity in the past two years to deepen my understanding of what it means for families go hungry. As the director of the Family Center of Washington County, the region's Parent Child Center, I also know that when families suffer from "food insecurity," the youngest children are often the most vulnerable. Like grizzly bears fighting for their cubs, parents fiercely protect their children from the pangs of hunger, but they sometimes need a safety net.

On July 8 this paper reported that food stamp use in Vermont is at an all-time high, as families scramble to cope with high fuel costs. The rising cost of living means that early childhood professionals see children who come to child care depending more than ever on the nutritious food we provide. Low-income families do their best to provide healthy food, but many households would be stretched even tighter without the meals their children get in care. The Family Center and many other child care programs use the federally funded Child Care Food Program to provide free meals and snacks to children.

In a recently released report from the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger, Family Center parents spoke with candor about how the economy has affected their food situations. One mother admitted that while she used to be able to buy healthy food

Another parent revealed that on days when there is not enough money to buy food for her preschooler's lunches, she sends her son knowing he will be allowed to "eat with the babies and help with his younger brother." Fortunately, the Family Center's expansion to a new building next spring will also mean extending our food program to the Preschool; current facilities have limited us to serving only the infants and toddlers.

The staff and parents are anticipating our new building and expanded food service with excitement because the Child Care Food Program means more than just getting enough food. Young children who eat family-style meals with peers and adults learn critical social skills and expand their taste for nutritious foods. Parents are often amazed to find out that their toddler has learned to enjoy spinach or soy burgers, and they use ideas from our menus to prepare more healthful meals at home. One parent said, "(My child has) been exposed to a lot of different foods that he wouldn't have tried at my house."

We are glad to invest in expanding our food program because we know that nutritious food is crucial to quality child care. But in Washington County, only about 30% of licensed programs serve meals and snacks through the federally funded Child Care Food Program or the National School Lunch Program. Many of the non-participating centers are eligible, but feel daunted by the extra time to prepare food and paperwork or, like the Family Center, lack the kitchen facilities to prepare meals on a large scale.

As a resource for child care providers in this county, we want to continue to reach out to both centers and homes to help them be able to participate in the food program as well. We plan to continue to work with the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger to do outreach and education, and to be a model for providers that want to start a food program themselves. As a community, we must recognize the investment in quality that these child care providers want to make, and support them with the time and resources we have. When a sour economy threatens our youngest children, no one will fight back more fiercely than a Vermonter.

Lee Lauber is executive director of the Family Center of Washington County and a member of the Washington County Hunger Council, which is part of an initiative funded by the Northfield Savings Bank.

About the Author

From www.timesargus.com:

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Tables and chairs, scaled for the very young, allow older infants and toddlers to come to the table independently, and to have the comfort.

Latest news on infant and toddler nutrition and provides age specific information on feeding children for the first two years.

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