

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As part of strengthening community through social responsibility, Ys are launching and enhancing programs to address hunger and improve the nutritional value of the food they provide for families.

By Kelley Hunsberger



HUNGER IS A REAL—AND GROWING—PROBLEM IN THE UNITED STATES:

48.8 million people struggle to purchase food each day. Sometimes they go without it. Of those, 16.2 million are children, according to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) in Washington, D.C.

"It affects nearly every community," says Crystal FitzSimons, Director of School and Out-of-School Time Programs at FRAC.

Hunger and food insecurity is tied directly to poverty and low wages, a problem that has been compounded by a down economy. With poverty rates at their highest levels in 50 years, there is less money available for food, especially nutritious food.

To ease this burden, Ys across the country have launched programs to address hunger and emphasize the importance of nutrition. With the help of national and local partnerships—federal grants, the Walmart Foundation Summer Food Grants and local food pantries and schools—Ys not only feed kids and families in their communities, but they also work to put the healthiest possible options on the table.

"Ys have a really important role to play in ensuring the kids and families they serve have nutritious meals and snacks," says FitzSimons. "[These] programs really do a lot to reduce food insecurities. The Y staff is uniquely positioned to help because they already have that connection with kids and the community."

Feeding Families When School is Out

When the school year ends, so do the free or reduced-cost meals for more than 19 million children in the country, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

That creates a hardship for many families in the area of the **Matt Griffin YMCA** in SeaTac, Wash. Sixty-seven percent of the students in the school district the Y serves receive free or reduced-cost lunches during the school year. In the three schools within walking distance of the Y, that number rises to 80 percent.

So the Matt Griffin Y applied for a grant from YMCA of the USA in summer 2011 that was funded by the Walmart Foundation, which would allow the Y to expand its existing summer food program.

Y-USA had received \$3 million from the Walmart Foundation as part of Walmart's \$25 million Summer Giving Campaign, and Y-USA re-granted more than \$2.4 million to Y associations and branches. The grants provided supplemental funds to Ys that already were participating in the USDA's Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), where meals are provided for free by an SFSP sponsor, or



reimbursed from federal funds. Grants were given to more than 300 Ys in four categories of work:

- 1. **ENGAGEMENT:** Establishing new or lapsed summer food sites.
- 2. **ENHANCEMENT:** Improving the quality of food or number of kids served.
- 3. **LEADERSHIP:** Being a site sponsor, which involves coordinating community effort and fiscal responsibility.
- 4. **INNOVATION:** Enhanced programming, collaboration and transportation.

With help from these funds, the Matt Griffin Y launched the **Summer Lunch Bunch** program to offer free lunches to children and teens. "Summer feeding is a huge need in this community," says Claudia Tanis, Branch Executive, Matt Griffin Y. "It's a struggle for many to know where and when they can get a healthy meal. For many summers, we partnered with the school district to offer free lunch. But we have never been

SETTING THE STANDARD

YMCA of the USA recently released and committed to the adoption of new Healthy Eating and Physical Activity standards (HEPA) in early childcare and afterschool programs.

The commitment is to the Partnership for a Healthier America and will help ensure that more children have access to healthy food and physical activity in the Y's 10,000 early childhood and afterschool programs across the country.

THE HEPA STANDARDS WILL:

- Establish a minimum of expected physical activity for children of different ages enrolled in our programs.
- Define food and beverages offerings, including designating water as the primary beverage during snack times and offering fruits and vegetables as snack options.
- Limit the amount of screen time (e.g., watching TV, playing video games, using computers).
- Encourage breastfeeding of infants in our care.
- Commit Ys to conducting parent education to encourage healthy behaviors at home.

The full list of standards is available on YMCAExchange.org. Ys also can find healthy living resources for afterschool programs on the website under Programs/Child Care/Afterschool, including the Food and Fun Curriculum, Youth Health and Fitness Curriculum Resource Guide, and Youth Health and Fitness Training Kit.



able to serve the amount of people we did this summer."

The Y used the supplemental funds provided by the Walmart grant for supplies and staffing. It fed more than 400 youth—an average of 104 per day, up from an average of 32 per day in summer 2010. Although the Y obtained lunches at no cost through the school district and a local food bank as part of SFSP, it used some of the grant funds to provide local fresh produce at each lunch—food that parents and caregivers, who are not allowed to partake in lunches through government funding, also could enjoy.

The Matt Griffin Y made meal times an opportunity to bring families together. As part of **Summer Lunch Bunch**, each day included one hour of activities for youth and their family members. The Y offered crafts, board games, a self-directed activity area, a mobile library and several recreation activities in the gym. "Families could come in and engage in activities with Y staff and other families," Tanis says.

As one parent said of the program: "The **Summer Lunch Bunch** program is great for my kids because it teaches them healthy food habits, keeps them active and makes me more aware of what it really takes to raise a child."

From the Farm to the Preschool Classroom

Providing nutritious meals to children is a year-round endeavor for the **YMCA of Greater Springfield** in Massachusetts.

The Y serves more than 1,000 children in 14 different communities and six school districts. It also has more than 20 licensed care centers for children from four weeks to 18 years old. And nearly 90 percent of children in the Greater Springfield Y's downtown facilities and programs received subsidized meals during the school year.

Families in Springfield often do their shopping at drugstores, and they believe fresh fruits and vegetables are too expensive or difficult to find, says Kathleen Treglia, Vice President of Education and Government Relations at the



Ten Ys that participated in summer food programs gathered in Chicago in October to discuss hunger in their communities, opportunities and challenges in collaborating and providing food, and what it meant for them to be involved in this work. Here's what these leaders had to say:

- "The kids ate fresh fruit every day. You have no idea how radical this is."
- "The reputation of our Y in the community has been transformed for the better."
- "I saw a miracle this summer. No question about it."
- "Hunger is an issue of equity, and this summer we could do something about that."
- "This work changed my eating habits and my family's eating habits so we could model healthy living better."
- "There's a community connectedness that happens through this work."
- "This changed my life."

YMCA of Greater Springfield. "Springfield is made up of a lot of food deserts," Treglia says. "[Families] can't always get access to quality food."

Poor-quality food significantly heightens a child's risk for obesity. The risk might be greatest for preschool-aged

GROWING HEALTHY FOOD PROGRAMS

Implementing a food program can seem daunting, but it's not as difficult as you think. The key is to identify your Y's capabilities to serve the needs of your community.

Whether these programs serve the needs of out-of-school kids or they're a part of a year-round effort, there are key components that bind them all:

OFFER MORE THAN FOOD: "Our program was not just about eating," says Amy White, Financial Development Director, Matt Griffin YMCA. "You need to offer engaging programs to pique and keep kids' interests. Families really like the opportunity to come to our Y together, be active, play and learn, and eat a healthy meal."

EDUCATE: Ys need to educate their staff and communities about the food hardships that millions of U.S. citizens face, as well as the importance of good nutrition. "So many people don't realize the extent of the problem," says Crystal FitzSimons of FRAC.

APPLY FOR FEDERAL GRANTS: Contact your state child nutrition agency to learn what the process is for your state, says FitzSimons. Ys often don't know they're eligible to participate in some of these programs.

PARTNER WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS: "We leveraged multiple existing partnerships to help launch our **Summer Lunch Bunch** program, including Highline School District, a local area food bank, a local hotel and volunteers from our Board of Managers," says Claudia Tanis of the Matt Griffin Y.

START SMALL: Healthy food programs don't have to mean large overhauls all at once. "Just buy fresh fruit," says Jessica Collins of Partners for a Healthier Community. "Change your snack and get rid of all the canned fruit that comes with syrup."



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children, says Jessica Collins, Director of Special Initiatives for Partners for a Healthier Community (PHC), a non-profit organization committed to building a healthier Springfield through civic leadership, collaborative partnerships and advocacy.

"Nationally, with regard to childhood obesity, the preschool age has been ignored, as there is more energy going toward the K-12 environment," Collins says. "More than 30 percent of children in Springfield already are overweight or obese when entering kindergarten."

The menu for the Springfield Y's preschool classrooms wasn't helping the issue. Fruit, for example, was served out of a can, drowning in sugary syrup. "We knew we had to do better and that our menu wasn't healthy enough for our children," Treglia says.

To start improving their menu options, the Y of Greater Springfield got

involved in PHC and collaborated with other preschools in Springfield to start the **Farm to Preschool and Families Program**. The program is a co-op model in which preschools can purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers. "The program is about making the child the change agent [for healthy eating] in their home who goes into kindergarten liking and demanding healthy food," Collins says.

The co-op structure allows the preschools to order produce in bulk. This adds nutritious options to the schools' menus without increasing their budgets. Since the co-ops launched, participating preschools—including the Y—have experienced more than 30 percent cost savings and have generated more than \$30,000 for local businesses, farmers and orchards.

Since joining the **Farm to Preschool Program**, the Y has done a complete

turnaround in terms of the types of food it serves, Treglia says. In 2010, for example, the Y served nearly 12,000 pounds of fresh produce, including 1,500 pounds of apples and 2,400 pounds of potatoes. In 2009, the Y served approximately 30 pounds of fresh produce.

The program is more than just the co-op, however. Because education is an important part of the process, organizations involved in the co-op—including Ys—can send their staff to a professional development series headed by the PHC to learn about the latest nutrition guidelines, culinary skills and business management. "We did a professional development training for culinary skills such as how to [freshly] can fruits and vegetables for the off-season," Collins says.

The Y's chef also visited other organizations and childcare centers that

already were implementing fresh produce and healthy menus. "The education part has got to go hand-in-hand [with the food change]," Collins says.

That's why the Y also is educating children on healthy eating. On Wednesdays, for example, preschool students build their own snacks using healthy foods. Kids have access to a garden where they can grow their own vegetables. The Y also regularly sends home recipe cards with children and the chef sometimes makes smoothies or hands out bags of granola in the Y's lobby.

"We're trying to change the entire culture," says Treglia. "You have to walk the talk. We are obligated to continue this quest for health." ▼



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— Jessica Collins, Director of Special Initiatives for Partners for a Healthier Community, Springfield, Ill.

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