



Baltimore County drive-thru summer food program offers meals for kids

Story by Racquel Bazos, The Baltimore Sun 6/26/25

BALTIMORE – Pallets stacked high with cardboard boxes filled with breakfast and lunch foods, as well as gallons of 1% milk, were set in front of Baltimore County's Hereford High School at 8 a.m. Tuesday.

By 8:15 a.m., over 200 boxes were gone. By 8:30 a.m., that number had nearly doubled. Ultimately, that day, thousands of struggling families received thousands of meals, thanks to a new and fast-growing school district food distribution program.

Among those taking part were Santina Indusa and her niece, Latrease Brooks of Windsor Mill, who picked up meals for four children attending school in the district, aged 10, 14, 17 and 18.

"It's summertime and whoo, things are getting difficult financially," said Indusa of Glen Burnie. "And boys grow really quickly and eat a lot."

Jaime Hetzler, director of Baltimore County Schools' Food and Nutrition Services, and a crew of about 10 operate this food distribution program.

Summer Meals To-Go, now in its second year, saw huge popularity and demand last year. Last year, her team distributed approximately 500 to 600 boxes per week at one site and 400 at the other. The food, given out on a first-come, first-served basis, was gone in minutes on the first day.

This year, the district requested that families register. About 3,700 registered families did, representing a fivefold increase in needed food. On Tuesday, between Hereford and Carroll Manor, the team distributed 1,035 boxes, or 10,350 meals.

"So the very first day of this program last year, we did the best we could with the estimates we had. We had absolutely no way of determining what the turnout would be and obviously it was overwhelmingly popular," Hetzler said.

Because so many children rely on school meals, the federal government's U.S. Department of Agriculture offers summer meals to combat food insecurity while school is out. Summer meals traditionally meant offering single meals to be eaten on site, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced changes allowing families to pick up several meals at once, Hetzler said.

The popularity of that model continued in the post-COVID era, especially for families in more remote areas, she said.

Families picking up food on Tuesday gave a variety of reasons for signing up for the program, but most cited financial hardships.

"Times are tight for sure," said Brandy Schultz, the mom of three school-aged kids, who came with her 13-year-old daughter to pick up three boxes. "And I just figured the program's out there to help people, so might as well just take advantage of it... It's not going to make or break us ... but it's definitely helpful for sure."

Times are also tough for some school food programs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced earlier this year \$1 billion in cuts to programs that allow schools and local food banks to buy from local growers. The Biden administration had added more than \$1 billion to the program in 2024.

Hetzler says her office is largely insulated from the Trump administration cuts. Though cuts on the federal level have affected Baltimore County, Food and Nutrition Services hasn't been negatively impacted, she said.

Those receiving food don't have to meet any specific income, residence or school enrollment requirements. They must only have children between the ages of 2 and 18.

Drive-thru programs all summer

Each week until Aug. 14, families will have access to food at three sites delivered drive-thru-style in rural Baltimore County: Hereford High School, Carroll Manor Elementary School and Kingsville Elementary School.

This week's menu included lunches featuring fresh carrots and clementines, yogurt and ham and cheese or pizza "anytimers," which Hetzler said "is really another name for a Lunchable." Breakfasts had items like cereal cups, juices and granola.

The drive-thru program is popular and convenient for families, but it's not the only way the school district is feeding children over the summer. Children can get free lunches at many libraries across the county.

Summer programs hosting groups of kids, such as camps and churches, can also register to receive food from BCPS delivered. Summer school students also receive free meals.

Parents at Tuesday's event said that, with school out, it's often hard to meet their family's food needs.

Steve Adelman of Parkville said Tuesday that he was picking up meals for his two 9-year-old children. Programs like this one help fill the gaps over the summer, he said.

Kimberly Torres, 18, of Essex, registered for the program in a separate line at Carroll Manor. She said the extra food helped since her family was struggling financially.

A 'tremendous increase' in food demand

Though the program is not limited to county residents or students of the county's school district, Baltimore County poverty has skyrocketed in recent years, according to Laurie Taylor-Mitchel, founder of The Student Support Network.

The group is a non-profit that provides things like food, clothing and personal care products for free to students in its 21 member schools across the district.

"We're seeing a tremendous increase in demand for food," Taylor-Mitchel said. At the last food distribution the network held at Parkville High School on June 11, she said families lined up an hour beforehand, and all 75 bags of food and other basic necessities were gone in 40 minutes. Some families didn't receive anything.

"As fast as we could put it in the cars, there was another car there. And that's one school," she said.

Data from this past school year show that just over three-quarters of Baltimore County Public Schools students, nearly 83,000 students, qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

Children can qualify for free or reduced-price meals if they participate in a federal assistance program like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), if they are homeless, a migrant, runaway or foster child, or based on their family's income.

Families with incomes below 130% of the federal poverty level can get free meals; those between 130% and 185% can get reduced meals, according to the USDA.

For families experiencing poverty and food insecurity in the county, economic pressures might continue to worsen. The price of food in May 2025 was 2.9% higher than in May 2024, the USDA said, and prices are projected to rise through the end of this year.