



Food Bank fights hunger with nutritious meals for local youth

by kelly k. serrano

It's 5 p.m. at the Boys & Girls Club in north Fort Collins and two dozen or so schoolchildren sit at colorful tables in the dining area.

When it's quieted down enough — though never silent — the children are excused in groups to retrieve plates piled with meatball subs, fresh pears and celery sticks, and a carton of milk.

Dinner is served.

The Boys & Girls Club is one of several sites across Larimer County offering free meals to the area's children through the Food Bank for Larimer County's Kids Cafe program. Amy Pezzani, executive director of the Food Bank, launched the program in 2005. The program is part of Feeding America's national Kids Cafe, which provides free meals and nutritious snacks to children in families with low incomes.

This summer, at a time when many services for those struggling financially are shrinking, local Kids Cafe sites will increase from six to seven, and four summer-school sites — Irish, Putnam, Tavelli and Bacon elementary schools — will receive about 400 snacks total per day.

"We don't just grow because we have a certain number of sites to reach," says Food Bank agency relations manager Kristin Bieri. "We evaluate where we're at and if we're serving the kids that need to be served. [Sites such as Harmony Road are] in pockets of poverty that aren't apparent to other parts of the community."

Bieri estimates the Kids Cafe will provide 28,000 breakfasts and lunches this summer.

Last year, the program served 66,049 meals to children between the ages of 3 and 18 years. Each site is within a mile of an elementary school with more than 50 percent of its students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.



"We actually have kids I know would go home and have nothing to eat," says Pam Rud, site supervisor for the Kids Cafe at the Boys & Girls Club in Fort Collins.

Children and staff usually don't know why a child

is eating, since their families don't have to financially qualify to participate, she says. But some parents have told Rud that they couldn't feed their children otherwise. "We all need help sometimes," she says, noting that in June 2009, the club's membership increased by 300 — resulting in almost that many more mouths to feed.

"I think [the program is] really helpful for most of the kids who are there," says Connie Salazar, whose son, Anthony, 10, eats at the Kids Cafe the few times a month he's at the club. "It looks like many of them there don't eat. A lot of parents won't ask for help when they need it."

Since she has been unemployed since last August, buying groceries for a family of six has gotten difficult, so every little bit of help is appreciated, Salazar says.

"There were times where I wondered how I'm going to feed them," Salazar says.

Single mom Leslie Hilgenberg says it's a "lifesaver" having her daughter, Sarah, 11, fed a nutritious meal by the time she picks her up after work. It relieves her of the stress of fixing dinner once home, is a "tremendous financial help," and gives the mother and daughter more quality time together.

Besides going home with a full belly, participants in the Kids Cafe are getting nutrients essential to brain and body development as well as exposure to foods they may not eat otherwise, Bieri says.

"We're pretty serious about providing healthy meals," she says, noting the program exceeds USDA standards. "We hardly ever use prepared food. Most everything we serve is from scratch. We have a very big focus on fresh produce, so every day we try to serve fresh vegetables, fruit or both. There are no options: you get your main dish, you get your side dish, you get your milk and you get your fruit."

It will cost about \$200,000 during the next fiscal year to continue Kids Cafe, Bieri says. Depending on whether it's summer or the school year, funding comes from the federal Summer Food Service Program; the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program; the cities of Fort Collins and Loveland; community support; private donations; and other grants, including a \$10,000 donation from the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado, which the Food Bank will use to fund meals during the school year in 2010 at either the Harmony Road or Maple Terrace location.

**Kids Cafe Summer Schedule**

- Boys & Girls Club**  
1608 Lancer Dr., Ft. Collins ■ Mon-Fri, 9-9:30 a.m. & noon-12:45 p.m.
  - Boys & Girls Club**  
2500 E. 1st St., Loveland ■ Mon-Fri, noon-12:45 p.m.
  - Boys & Girls Club**  
3815 Harrison Ave., Wellington ■ Mon-Fri, noon-12:45 p.m.
  - CORE Center**  
114 Bristlecone Dr., Ft. Collins ■ Mon-Thurs, noon-12:45 p.m.
  - Harmony Road Kids Cafe**  
2500 E. Harmony Rd., Ft. Collins ■ Mon-Fri, 9:30-10 a.m. & noon-12:45 p.m.
  - Maple Terrace Apartments**  
574 E. 23rd St., Loveland ■ Mon-Thurs, 10-10:30 a.m. & 12:15-1 p.m.
  - Northside Aztlan Community Center**  
112 E. Willow St., Ft. Collins ■ Mon-Fri, 8:30-9 a.m. & noon-12:45 p.m.
- Kids Cafe snacks will also be available at four Fort Collins summer schools: Irish, Putnam, Tavelli and Bacon. For more information on the Kids Cafe program, including locations during the upcoming school year, visit [www.foodbanklarimer.org/services/kids-cafe](http://www.foodbanklarimer.org/services/kids-cafe) or call Kristin Bieri at 530-3105.

**GOOD FOOD** Kids Cafe provides platefuls of yummy nourishment: main dish, side dish, fresh fruit and milk.