

Children

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✓ Campaign aims to feed hungry county children

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SANTA CRUZ — You no longer have to go to developing nations to see hungry children.

In Santa Cruz County, local activists say 41 percent of children are underfed.

But the Campaign to End Childhood Hunger, which kicks off today, aims to draw people, businesses and agencies together to end children's hunger in the county — and do it within 18 months.

"This is a really positive community effort," said Michael Walker, campaign coordinator.

"It puts local groups, individuals, businesses and the county's benefit folks all pointed in the same direction — to do something about childhood hunger."

The reality of underfed children in the county is not simply a child who is starving to death, said Walker. Their experience ranges from eating cold cereal for two days when the food stamps run out, to skipping meals when there's no money.

Walker said that 41 percent of children in the county under age 17 are at risk for going hungry.

That percentage represents the 10,747 children under 5 years of age who are eligible for the government's Women, Infants and Children program. WIC, a supplemental nutrition program, provides coupons for particular food items for malnourished pregnant, postpartum women and children.

The 41 percent also includes the 12,046 children who qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches because of their parents' incomes.

For various reasons, children are not getting the services they need, said Walker.

As for the WIC program, Walker said that the federal government only allocated a third of the places needed in the county for the women and children eligible.

The Campaign to End Childhood Hunger will also work to increase the number of people enrolled for food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and the federally funded School Lunch, School Breakfast and Summer Lunch programs.

"One of the reasons why those programs only serve 21 to 35 percent of those who qualify is that

many still stigmatize themselves rather than get help," Walker said.

He also said the piles of paperwork required also intimidate many people.

However, 60 percent of those who reap the benefits of food stamps are children, according to Robert Garcia, chairman of the campaign.

Part of the campaign's efforts is to get more schools offering the breakfast and lunch programs.

Garcia said all schools in Live Oak and Soquel offer lunch for free or at a reduced price. He said the

Pajaro Valley Unified School District has a "strong commitment" to the program and offers the lunch at 11 of its 19 schools.

He said the Santa Cruz City School District offers the program in four of 12 schools, while none of the schools in Scotts Valley or Bonny Doon offer the program.

And Walker said the campaign is looking for non-profit groups to sponsor the Summer Lunch program. In the past, the program has been sponsored by the county.

The campaign is borrowing staff from Food and Nutrition Services

Inc., a non-profit agency. Walker said the group's board of directors will be the sponsors, which will determine its revenue.

More than 30 agencies have joined the campaign, including the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency, Food and Nutrition Services Inc., the Community Action Board, Head Start and others.

The first business to sponsor the program is New Leaf Community Market. The store will match any donation made up to \$100.

To participate in the campaign, call 688-7072.