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School's Out, Summer Food Service Programs Are In

The Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and Montana Food Bank Network are on a joint mission this summer. Both organizations want to ensure children have easy access to Summer Food Service Program sites across the state. Funded by the US Department of Agriculture, the Summer Food Service Program supports free breakfast, lunch, and supper meals, as well as snacks, for hungry children in communities throughout the Big Sky country.

"For many children, the end of the school year is the beginning of a summer filled with fun and relaxation," says Christine Emerson, MS, RD, registered dietitian and OPI director of School Nutrition Programs. "For a significant number of Montana families, summer is an especially difficult time of year. During the summer, children from low-income families do not have access to school breakfast or lunch and their families may have a hard time putting enough nutritious food on the table. In these situations, Summer Food Service Programs (SFSP) can fill a critical nutrition gap."

Recognizing that hunger does not take a summer vacation, OPI and the Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) are collaborating to provide critical outreach about local SFSP opportunities. This means increasing both the number of SFSP sponsors and the number of low-income children eating at SFSP sites. Thanks to a variety of SFSP sponsors, Montana children can enjoy healthy meals at schools, day camps, parks, recreation centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, Salvation Army centers, and a variety of other sites.

"The real problem in Montana is that only 16 out of every 100 kids who receive free or reduced price school meals also eat free SFSP meals during the summer," notes Minkie Medora, MS, RD, with the MFBN Food Security Council. "In our surveys around the state, we have found that many families do not know where the free summer meals for children are served. That's why outreach and awareness are so important." Here are three ways that all Montanans can help ensure that at-risk children have access to SFSP meals:

- **Locate nearby summer meal sites to share with needy families:** Montana Food Bank Network's website makes it easy to locate summer meal sites at <http://mfbn.org/summerfoodmt>. With a click of your mouse, you can see the locations of SFSP sites by city/town or by county.
- **Volunteer in local programs to support summer activities:** Many Montana SFSP programs offer more than lunch in the park. For example, the Education Foundation for Billings Public Schools offers *Reading Rocks* (www.billings.k12.mt.us/bpef/), where volunteers read and provide free books to children.
- **Support the Montana Food Bank Network:** As Montana's statewide hunger fighting organization, the network (<http://mfbn.org/>) is building a unified force to provide long term solutions to food insecurity. Anyone can support MFBN efforts with a donation - large or small, and in many other ways as well.

"Food insecurity affects our most vulnerable Montana neighbors," explains Kate Devino, MFBN Director of Public Policy. "Supporting Summer Food Service Programs is an important way to help them."

Past and current issues of Eat Right Montana's monthly packets can be downloaded for free at www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrighthealthyfamilies.htm