

## Fitchburg Community Meets to Address the Summer Meal Gap



Project Bread and Fitchburg Public Schools convened a meeting of community partners from Fitchburg, Clinton, Gardner, and Lunenburg on Thursday, November 9th to discuss strategies to feed more hungry children during the summer months. State Representative Stephan Hay and Sue Christensen, the Community Development Administrator with the City of Fitchburg, were present to show their support for the summer meals program and contribute to the discussion.

In Fitchburg, 93% of students are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals, and due to the Community Eligibility Provision, all enrolled students receive free breakfast and lunch during the school year. However, when school lets out for the summer, students lose access to these meals, often resulting in unhealthy eating habits, fatigue, weight gain, and learning loss. This leaves many at a disadvantage compared to their peers when they return to school in the fall. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), administered in Massachusetts by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), is working to fill this meal gap by providing free meals to children and teens during summer when school is not in session.

The Fitchburg School Department currently sponsors 11 summer meal sites in the towns of Fitchburg, Clinton, Gardner, and Lunenburg. In 2016, 705 meals were served daily, amounting to 21,041 total meals served during the summer months. The Fitchburg School Department has expanded the number of sites and made great progress growing participation in the number of youth participating in summer meals, but of the 4,778 students eating free school lunch each day during the year, still only 705 eat a meal at a summer meal site each day.

“That’s staggering,” said Jill Lucius, Director of Food Services for Fitchburg Public Schools. “That is a shocking difference when you

look at the number of kids eating lunch in school each day and the number eating over the summer.”

To reach more of these students, the Fitchburg School Department has partnered with the Child Nutrition Outreach Program (CNOP) at Project Bread to explore innovative strategies to increase participation in the summer meals program. Thursday’s community meeting, led by Lucius and Project Bread Outreach Coordinator Rosemarie Caward, began with an update about the current status of the program in Fitchburg and the surrounding community.

Dave Semenza, Operations Coordinator for the Fitchburg Public Schools Food Service Department, explained that participation in the summer meals program in the greater Fitchburg area has nearly doubled from 15,000 total meals served in 2012 to 29,200 last year. Despite this growth, there is still need not being met. The group spent the majority of the session brainstorming ways to reach more kids and continue this growth.

“The challenge of low participation is not unique to Fitchburg,” said Maura Ackerman, Assistant Director of Programs at Project Bread. “Statewide we see that only 15% of students who receive free or reduced-price school meals are actually participating in the summer meals program. At Project Bread, we believe in the importance of finding local solutions. That is why we are here today, hearing directly from the people in this community about how we can better understand and ultimately remove the barriers keeping children and teens from receiving free summer meals in Fitchburg.”

One of the challenges identified was geographic proximity to summer meal sites. The group looked a map of Fitchburg to identify gaps where children were not within a one-mile radius of a summer meal site. Lucius pitched the idea of a mobile meals model, a refrigerated truck that would drive around and deliver meals to many locations, likely meeting kids closer to where they live. In addition to making summer meals more accessible for many children and teens, a mobile meals truck could help with another challenge faced: building awareness for the program on the front line. “If you have a colorful truck rolling through the streets of your town and serving free meals to kids, this will start a conversation,” said Ackerman.

The meeting concluded as Lucius identified a smaller working group that will continue to meet and identify strategies to help reach more kids. “We are ready to do whatever we need to do to continue feeding more kids,” said Lucius. “It is just so important.”