

Food Program Helps Feed Kids Away From School

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DAYTONA BEACH -- 'Tis the season for giving out toys and food for holiday dinners, but some Volusia County children got bags of groceries instead to stave off hunger during their 19-day vacation from school that started Thursday.

The program benefiting 140 children at Westside, Turie T. Small and Osceola elementary schools was the premiere of a new initiative by Food Brings Hope, which assists homeless and economically disadvantaged students at eight Volusia County schools.

"I am worried sick about these children going home and having nothing to eat," said Forough Hosseini, founder and chairwoman of Food Brings Hope and senior vice president of ICI Homes. "How can you study if you're hungry?"

The Hosseini Family Foundation supplied \$5,000 worth of groceries to send home with the children over the winter vacation. Area resident and radio sportscaster Preston Root stepped forward to pay for the food project at Osceola Elementary in Ormond Beach through his Sumar Foundation.

Hosseini plans to continue sending food home with the children on weekends -- when they don't have access to free and reduced-price school meals -- after their vacation and is seeking community donations to help pay for the program.

She launched Food Brings Hope in 2007 after hearing stories from her children about classmates who were homeless. It operates as a donor advised fund of the Community Foundation of Volusia & Flagler Counties, a division of the area United Way.

The after-school program provides tutoring, nutrition and financial information, visits to area colleges and field trips to sports and cultural events. Its events always include meals.

The need for its services has grown steadily as the economy declined, Hosseini said. "I have never seen so many kids in such bad shape," she said.

The statistics and feedback from people who work with affected children, such as Volusia schools' homeless liaison Pam Woods, back up her assessment.

Woods said she's seen more families living in cars and other "dire" situations this school year than ever before.

The number of homeless children attending Volusia schools changes daily but currently runs at about 1,400. That's up from about 950 homeless students in 2007, when Food Brings Hope started.

A state survey for the 2010-11 school year, the last year for which complete numbers are available, showed Volusia with 2,016 homeless students, the ninth-largest number in the state. Flagler had 322 students, ranking 37th of the 67 school districts.

When the number of homeless students is compared to overall enrollment, Volusia had a rate of 3.3 percent, ranking 24th in the state. Flagler's rate was 2.5 percent, 35th in Florida.

The homeless count includes children who live in emergency or transitional shelters, doubled-up housing with relatives or others, cars or other public places, hotels or motels and those awaiting foster care placement.

The number of area children qualifying for free and reduced-price meals at school based on family income also has been growing steadily in recent years. The percentage of Volusia schoolchildren

qualifying for those programs has risen to 58 percent, up from 46 percent in 2007. About 60 percent of Flagler students qualify for those programs. I was unable to get a 2007 figure for Flagler.

A report on homeless children released this week by the National Center on Family Homelessness estimated 1.6 million American children -- one in 45 -- are homeless annually. That's a 38 percent increase since 2007.

The study ranked Florida ninth-worst in the nation on an index based on the number of homeless children, child well-being, risk for child homelessness and state policy and planning efforts.

"The recession has been a man-made disaster for vulnerable children," said Ellen Bassuk, the center's founder and president and an associate professor at Harvard Medical School. "Nationally, there are more homeless children today than after the natural disasters of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which caused historic levels of homelessness in 2006."

Principal Jim Tager of New Smyrna Beach High, one of the schools served by Food Brings Hope, has seen the effects first-hand on his campus. Eight years ago, 17 percent of the school's students qualified for free and reduced-price school meals. Today, 45 percent of students fall into that category.

Tager said the activities Food Brings Hope sponsors for New Smyrna Beach's Teen Zone Club have given its members something safe to do after school and helped improve their attendance and grades by providing a "sense of belonging."

"I think it's a lot of fun," said Brian Dunn, a sophomore who's been involved with the program since seventh grade. "They tutor us if we need help and we get to spend time with our friends."

Students Without Homes

Homeless students in school districts in Florida, ranked by the top 10 (and including where Flagler County ranks):

1. Miami-Dade	4,406
2. Orange	3,887
3. Hillsborough	3,659
4. Lake	2,992
5. Pinellas	2,915
6. Polk	2,446
7. Pasco	2,230
8. Broward	2,101
9. Volusia	2,016
10. Osceola	1,923
37. Flagler	322

SOURCE: Florida Department of Education.