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In many Upper Valley communities, meal programs for kids will lapse this summer

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WHITE RIVER JUNCTION — Free summer meals for children will be available in some parts of the Upper Valley this summer, but not all.

The Orange East Supervisory Union, which includes Bradford, Vt.-area schools, will not be offering summer meals this year, nor will the Windsor Central Supervisory Union, which includes Woodstock-area towns.

But Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union, which includes Windsor-area towns, will offer summer meals again in Windsor. In communities such as Hartford, Claremont and Newport, nonprofits have stepped up to provide summer meals again.

The meals are aimed at replacing free and reduced priced meals that qualifying students in New Hampshire and all students in Vermont receive at school during the academic year.

With the school year ending, inflation still elevated and pandemic-era emergency housing program expiring, families are expected to feel a pinch.

“We continue to see (that) a lot of the emergency programs put in place during the pandemic are ending,” Tim Morgan, child nutrition and program data manager for the nonprofit advocacy group Hunger Free Vermont, said. “That is going to leave a gap. Summer meals are an important part of the recipe to fill that gap for families with kids.”

This year fewer places in Vermont qualify for reimbursement by USDA to operate as open meal sites, where anyone 18 and under can come to get a free meal; and urban areas, such as Chittenden County in Vermont, no longer qualify as places that can serve non-congregate meals, Jamie Curley, the Vermont Agency of Education’s National School Lunch Program & Summer Food Service Program coordinator, said.

Instead, they must return to serving meals in a congregate fashion, as was required prior to the pandemic, so in those communities, “kids need to come eat on site,” Curley said.

Bradford-based OESU offered summer meals in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, John L. Barone, OESU’s assistant superintendent, said in an email.

“With the end of such programs, continuing with summer meals was not part of our supervisory union’s planning for this summer,” he wrote.

Barone also said it was unclear whether the supervisory union would have sufficient staff should it want to operate a summer meal program.

“The employees who run our food service programs do not work over the summer and are not required to work over the summer,” he wrote.

Meanwhile, Windsor Central schools do not qualify as an open enrollment site under USDA rules, which require that districts serve at least 50% of students who qualify for free or reduced price meals, to provide free meals to all, Gretchen Czaja, WCUD’s school nutrition program director, said in an email. The district will offer a paid meal program in July for students enrolled in the district’s Summer SOAK program.

The Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union is planning to offer free lunches and breakfasts in Windsor. The Windsor School site, 127 State St., is open to children ages 0-18. It is scheduled to run June 28 – Aug. 11, Monday – Friday, except for July 4. There is

an early pick up from 7:30 – 9 a.m. or meals also can be picked up or consumed on site from 9 -11:30 a.m.

“We used to set up different locations and chase our tail,” said Craig Locarno, the district’s director of food service. “Running it out of the school seems to be the best; most efficient way to do it.”

Still, he said, it’s a lot of effort for what Locarno estimates is 25 children per day in addition to summer school students.

“I truly do believe those 25 children do need it,” he said.

The Hartford Community Coalition runs its summer meal program, Take a Bite Out of Hunger, in a hybrid fashion. In all, last year the program provided 26,000 meals over eight weeks to about 1,000 children.

“We do our absolute best to try and break down barriers in terms of access and transportation,” Emily Musty Zanleoni, executive director of the Hartford Community Coalition, said. “With the restrictions coming back on to the program it is difficult.”

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The group will be offering two open sites where families with children can pick up a weekly meal bag: Mondays at the White River School from 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.; and Wednesdays at Hartford High School from 10 a.m. – 1 p.m. Meal bags include: A loaf of bread, meat, cheese and carrot sticks. There is a signup form online at: [hccvt.org](https://www.hccvt.org) (<https://www.hccvt.org/>). Registration in advance is not required, but it helps HCC to plan. Weekly meals begin the week of June 26 and run through Aug. 18.

One change from last year for the USDA meals is that HCC cannot do deliveries, which may mean that families in Quechee or West Hartford who can’t get to White River Junction for one of the pick up times may miss out. Another is that HCC cannot partner with the Haven to provide meals for the Haven’s summer camp because as a homeless shelter, the Haven fits into a different USDA meal category.

The “restrictions (have) gone back to not allowing us to collaborate with the Haven,” Zanleoni said. “...Small rural communities (have) to work together. Why would you encourage us to be more in our silos?”

HCC will make weekly meal bag deliveries to Twin Pines and Lebanon Housing Authority housing developments in Hartford and Lebanon. Since Lebanon doesn’t qualify as an open meal site for reimbursement through USDA, the Lebanon meals are funded through philanthropy, Zanleoni said.

Separately, HCC, in partnership with The Abbey Group, provides daily hot meals to summer schools in Hartford and Lebanon, as well as to several summer camps in Hartford. The camp meals start June 21.

“It’s a big undertaking,” Zanleoni said.

The Claremont Soup Kitchen, supported by donations and grants, operates a summer meal program in the city. The program operates Monday – Friday, 12 – 1 p.m., at five sites around the city: the Claremont Soup Kitchen, 51-53 Central St.; 135 Maple Ave.; Veterans Park; Monadnock Park and Barnes Park. The meals include a daily lunch and a breakfast to take home for the next day. It starts Monday and runs through August. The program will be closed July 4.

Cindy Stevens, the director of the Claremont Soup Kitchen, said operating the program outside of the USDA allows the group to reach more people. Last year, the program served more than 9,000 meals, Stevens said. That was up from just over 2,000 the year before.

Stevens described one parent who on her lunch break was able to pick up the meals and bring them home where her mother was watching the children during the day.

“Part of it is making these meals accessible,” Stevens said.

Elsewhere in Sullivan County, volunteers operate the Got Lunch Newport program, which provides deliveries to Newport-area families every other week throughout the summer, Monday through mid-September, and during school breaks during the school year, said Charen Urban, the group’s program coordinator.

The group provides boxes containing: bread, milk, cheese, eggs, meat, pasta, canned goods, juices and fruit cups.

“It’s supposed to be kid friendly,” Urban said.

During the height of the pandemic, the group was serving 100 families, but last summer that number dipped to 60. It’s now back up to 75 with inflation and other cost increases such as fuel, Urban said.

The volunteers operate six delivery routes and offer two pick up times. They’ve also recently added an emergency box program in case a new family needs a box or a regular family runs out.

But the increased costs the families face have also challenged the Got Lunch group, which relies on donations. Last week, the group was doing a mayonnaise drive in order to collect quarts of mayo.

“With what’s happened to the cost of mayonnaise that will save us several hundred dollars,” Urban said. “We’ve had to be creative.”

An online map of USDA summer meal sites is online at: [fns.usda.gov/meals4kids](https://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids) (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids>). Information about food resources also is available by call 211 in either of the Twin States. People also can find food resources by texting “food” or “comida” in Spanish to 304-304.

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