

GREATER MIDDLETOWN

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Groups Hope To Serve A Bigger Crowd

Advocates for children are trying to spread the word about the summer lunch program, which often goes unused by those in need.

By **BRITTANY DORN**
COURANT STAFF WRITER

MIDDLETOWN — If schoolchildren are getting subsidized lunches during the school year, often they need the same help during the summer.

MIDDLETOWN

But many children who qualify for free or subsidized lunches during the academic year aren't taking advantage of a similar summer program, offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, called the Summer Food Service Program.

Almost a third of Middletown's public school students qualify for the free or reduced-price lunches, but only 11 percent of them take advantage of the summer program, according to the Community Renewal Team Inc., which prepares the summer lunches for children in Middletown and Portland.

"The gap is huge between the number of meals served and the number of kids who need the meals," said Betsy Morgan, director of the Middlesex Coalition for Children, a child advocacy group.

A 2005 study conducted by Wesleyan University student researchers in collaboration with the Middlesex Coalition for Children determined that 16.1 percent of Middletown households with children are "food insecure," meaning there isn't enough to eat, and people living in one-third of those households experience physical symptoms as a result of lack of food.

"That's why we are so keen on taking steps like the summer lunch program," Morgan said. "They're actually going hungry."

Community Renewal is joining a variety of other partners, including End Hunger Connecticut, a nonprofit anti-hunger advocacy group, to work toward doubling the number of students who claim their free lunches this summer.

The lunches are offered to all children under 18, with no forms or permission slips necessary, at three sites in Middletown: Macdonough School, 66 Spring St., and the Traverse Square and Maplewood Terrace housing developments. Free lunch will be provided at each site from noon to 1 p.m. weekdays beginning June 25.

In accordance with federal regula-

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tions, the meals must be eaten on the premises, so organizers have focused on making the lunchtime environment enjoyable.

Toys and games were available at the three

sites last year. This year there are also a variety of planned events, including visits from semi-professional baseball mascots, farmers of locally grown produce, and an ice cream truck. (Kids can pick a treat for free.)

"[They are] all different reasons for kids to say, 'Let's turn off the Xbox and see what's happening over there today,'" said Nancy Pappas, director of external affairs for the Community Renewal Team. "We are going to make

sure we have enjoyable programs at the sites, so that if kids come by once, they will be interested in returning and telling their friends."

For now, organizers are focusing on getting the word out about the free lunches, an effort that will begin by sending fliers home from school with children, Pappas said.

Contact Brittany Dorn at bdorn@courant.com.