

Hunger agency starts summer meals for kids

With schools shutting down over the summer, kids could go hungry, nonprofit's staff says

In the face of school-nutrition programs shutting down for the summer, Ecumenical Hunger Program (EHP) in East Palo Alto launched its first "Summer Feeding" project for children ages 1 to 18 Monday.

The free, weekday breakfast and lunch program will run through Aug. 22 and accommodate up to 75 kids from low-income families.

"We have to feed these children ... who (otherwise) won't be having breakfast and lunch this summer," said Lea Martinez, the nonprofit organization's family-intake coordinator.

More than 27,000 children in San Mateo County receive free and reduced-priced lunches during the school year, according to Lesia Preston, the nonprofit's executive director.

Initially, the Ecumenical Hunger Program staff hoped to channel the money for summer meals to schools running summer sessions or to Head Start programs, Martinez said. But both entities are closing from June to August in light of state and federal budget woes.

"With the economy being so bad, EHP was like, 'We have to do this now,'" she said. When kids are out of school, families face increased financial concerns, she added: "PG&E goes up, the water bill goes up."

Breakfasts will consist of milk, fruit and perhaps a muffin or cereal, while lunches will range from sandwiches to spaghetti, Martinez said. She estimated the costs for breakfast and lunch will run approximately \$2 and \$2.70 per child, respectively. Ecumenical Hunger Program is funding the summer food project, with minimal reimbursement from the state Department of Education's nutrition division.

On Monday, 40 children attended the meal program, Martinez said.

Breakfasts are offered from 9 to 10 a.m.; lunches from 1 to 2 p.m. Following each meal, the nonprofit plans to provide short activities focused around health and nutrition, through arts and crafts or gardening, Martinez said.

Located at 2411 Pulgas Ave., Ecumenical Hunger Program is a 39-year old nonprofit that provides emergency food, clothing, case management and household essentials to families in need in East Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Palo Alto. Last year, the agency reported serving nearly 16,000 individuals.

Donations of food are welcome, Martinez said, although the contributions will be used in the nonprofit's general emergency food program rather than the summer feeding program, for which meals are supplied by contract by a vendor.

— *Jocelyn Dong*