

'One paycheck away from financial crisis': How schools helped feed families when COVID hit

May, 21st, 2021

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NYACK – It took just a month into the pandemic for Rockland BOCES Family Resource Center coordinator Nakisha Carter to figure out that a weekend feeding

program for students wasn't going to touch the need so many families were facing.

"About April, I realized how many are one paycheck away from financial crisis," Carter said as she watched students at River View High School assemble bags of prepackaged and fresh food for students in Rockland BOCES programs.

In that first month, as lockdown took hold and COVID cases climbed, Carter said the list of students needing supplemental food had grown from 130 to around 200.

But they needed more than just boxes of cereal and jars of peanut butter and jelly, the standard weekend fare the district has sent home for years.

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Carter ramped up the amount of food so everyone in the family could have enough. She found ways to add fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, eggs and other protein. And she checked with all BOCES families weekly, because circumstances changed quickly.

And the Rockland BOCES team provided students sidelined from job-skills internships during the shutdown with hands-on experience by managing the expanded food delivery program.

Carter was one of several New Yorkers named a 2021 "Hunger Hero" by No Kid Hungry, a campaign run by the nonprofit Share Our Strength, which is committed to ending poverty and hunger across the U.S. and abroad.



Other local "Hunger Heroes" include Troy Kinsey, a cook at Yonkers Family YMCA, who made sure every child in every family had enough food each Monday to bridge to the next Monday.

No Kid Hungry has also honored Peekskill's Food Services staff, and North Rockland schools Superintendent Kris Felicello and the district's School Nutrition Department.

Peekskill schools Food Service Director Andrew Weisman said the beginning of the COVID shutdown left the district scrambling, "like everyone else."

Weisman said that in Peekskill, most kids walk to school and many families don't have their own vehicles. That became a hurdle for daily curbside pickup of supplementary food during remote schooling.

So in the fall, the district switched to one-day meal pickup that held seven days worth of breakfast and lunch per student in a package.

People needed it, Weisman said. "It was heartbreaking to see people lined up, six feet apart, 100-200 deep, to pick up food."

In North Rockland, Felicello said the focus was on easing families' worries during the stress of the pandemic. The district includes the working-class village of

Haverstraw and hamlet of Garnerville, which have experienced the highest rates of COVID infections in the county and among the highest in the state.

The district has offered food pickups at schools and community centers even during school breaks, Felicello said. Family Resource Center staff have dropped off food to families who were in quarantine.

While these local schools and organizations were honored for their response during COVID, the need was there prior to the pandemic. According to Feeding America, 1 in 6 New York children are considered food insecure, meaning cannot rely on access to consistent, nutritious food.

But the economic crash and health challenges brought by COVID made it so much worse, for so many, so quickly.

Students aid families, build job skills

To meet families' growing needs, Carter at Rockland BOCES first needed to access more food.

The Food Bank of the Hudson Valley in Cornwall provided food for pickup every other week. Carter said a vendor who had transported produce from New York farms to restaurants also helped get the program fruits and vegetables.

Then, Carter said, her team had to figure out how to get the food to families, since school was remote through spring, and then summer break came.

Staff from BOCES administration to transportation pitched in. They assembled bags of groceries at the Jesse Kaplan School gymnasium in West Nyack. Then bus drivers dropped off the bags of food at students' homes. Rockland BOCES programs serve districts in the county, as well as students with specialized needs



from Ulster and Dutchess to Putnam, Westchester and the Bronx.

“There would be 30 buses lined up in a queue,” Carter said.

With most students back in person, kids are now sent home with bags of food on multiple days. Any who are still remote get weekly deliveries.

As the pandemic eased and jobs started opening back up, Carter said families reached out to her to say they no longer needed the support. “They tell me, ‘I don’t need it anymore, please give it to another family.’ ”

While the “need is easing,” Carter said, “I wouldn’t say it’s back to pre-pandemic.”



When students returned — many BOCES programs launched in-person learning in October — the world of social-distancing and closed offices upended BOCES' job-training program called BEST, or Business Expertise for Student Training and Transition. The program is based at River View, an alternative high school that serves students with social, emotional and learning differences.

So the BOCES team figured out how to use the ramped-up food program to build the BEST students' employment and independent-living skills while their usual internships were shelved.

The BEST students operate the food distribution.



"Our kids would be going to internships that provide workforce training," said Maureen Danzig, worked-based teacher at River View.

Instead, running the food program provides them experience in organization, teamwork and communication, Danzig said.

According to the students, the experience is providing much more than that.

"I like giving groceries to people who can't afford them," Ethan Martinez, 18, said as he readied a new bag. "It makes me a good person. I'm doing the right thing."

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<https://www.lohud.com/story/news/local/rockland/2021/05/21/covid-sidelined-schools-but-they-kept-feeding-students-and-families-hunger-hero-boces/5035490001/>