

JULY 18, 2022

End Hunger Connecticut!, Child Nutrition Leaders & Advocates Gather for Round Table Discussion in East Hartford, CT



Pictured from left to right: Dan Giacomi (DSS), Jason Jakubowski (CT Foodshare), Jennie Hirsch (CT Foodshare), Dr. Sara Bleich (USDA), Lizbeth Silbermann (USDA), Catherine Hallisey (CT FoodCorps), Gladys Mercado (Office of Congressman John Larson), Julieth Callejas (End Hunger CT!), Mayor Mike Walsh (East Hartford), Erin Perpetua (SNACT, Norwich Public Schools), Mayor Luke Bronin (Hartford), Katie Pachkovsky (End Hunger CT!), Joel Berg (Hunger Free America), Shari Staeb (East Hartford Public Schools), Margaret Read (No Kid Hungry/Share Our Strength), Shannon Yearwood (CSDE), Dr. Marlene Schwartz (UConn Rudd Center), Dr. Brooke Bennett (UConn Rudd Center), and Maura Cook (United Way of Central and Northeastern CT).

East Hartford, Conn. – End Hunger Connecticut! (EHC!), national and local leaders, and nutrition policy experts and advocates came together this past Friday, July 15, at Joseph O. Goodwin Elementary School in East Hartford, CT to discuss summer and school meals for children in Connecticut. Notable attendees included: Dr. Sara Bleich, USDA Director of Nutrition Security and Health Equity, representatives from the Office of Congressman John B. Larson, East Hartford Mayor Michael P. Walsh, Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin – both members of the [Mayor’s Alliance to End Childhood Hunger](#) – the Connecticut State Department of Education, and the Connecticut Department of Social Services. The discussion was facilitated by Margaret Read, Senior Manager of Research and Policy at Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry Campaign.

EHC! convened leaders and experts for a roundtable to discuss important topics concerning the future of child nutrition in CT. Following the discussion, attendees met with children at the Goodwin Park summer meals site, operated by East Hartford Food Service Director Shari Staeb who manages several summer meals sites throughout the city of East Hartford.

“Sodexo’s goal is to help provide healthy, nutritious meals to the children in our community and create equitable access through the support of our community focused partnerships,” Staeb said. “Through the sponsorship from East Hartford Public Schools and in collaboration with the Town of East Hartford, the East Hartford Parks & Recreation Department, and local community programs, we are able to offer free summer meals at many locations throughout East Hartford.”

The Summer Food Nutrition Program (SFSP), is a child nutrition program funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which provides meals and snacks to children and teens 18-and-under during the summer months at no cost to families. In CT, the program is administered by the CT State Department of Education (CSDE) and promoted as the Free CT Summer Meals Program.

“When school lets out, millions of low-income children lose access to the school breakfasts, lunches and afterschool snacks and meals they receive during the regular school year. The Summer Nutrition Programs help fill this gap by providing free meals and snacks to children who might otherwise go hungry,” according to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).

During the discussion, leaders affirmed that the free summer meals program continues to be a vital resource for children and teens in Connecticut. Sites not only offer nutritious meals but provide a chance for young people to participate in enriching activities.

“Summer can be a particularly challenging time for families in our region who are struggling to make ends meet. United Way is proud to work with our partners to ensure access to critical resources such as free summer meals and quality enrichment programs to help children stay on-track academically,” said Maura Cook, Vice President of Marketing and Development at United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut.

Discussion participants also reviewed the benefits of pandemic-era changes to child nutrition programs which increased access to meals across the country, including Connecticut.

“Too many kids continue to face hunger during the summer months. The child nutrition waivers in place during the pandemic worked. Nationwide, the number of summer meals served in 2020 and 2021 were more than double than the number served in pre-pandemic times. These waivers, however, were only temporary. To truly close the gap between kids who have enough to eat and those who do not, we must learn from the past few years and implement long-term, effective policies. Going back to the way things were simply isn’t good enough,” said Read.

Dr. Marlene Schwartz, Director of the UConn Rudd Center for Public Policy and Health agreed that CT’s families benefited from the program flexibilities offered during the pandemic.

“The UConn Rudd Center surveyed over 1,400 parents last summer and fall and learned that the summer meal program is a critical source of nutritious food for children when school buildings are closed. Parents especially appreciated grab-and-go meals, and the ability to pick up multiple meals at once,” Dr. Schwartz said.

“EHC! wanted to bring leaders together at this critical moment to discuss the changes in school and summer meals over the past two years, address challenges that programs are still facing, and create strategies for how to move forward successfully as leaders, advocates, and educators to better serve CT’s residents,” said Julieth Callejas, EHC! Executive Director. “We thank the leaders who joined us for this important discussion and look forward to continuing conversations in the months ahead.”

Topics discussed included the recently passed [Keep Kids Fed Act](#), Healthy School Meals for All, and P-EBT. The round table also focused on lessons learned during the pandemic and what the future of school and summer meals looks like in Connecticut.

“We passed the Keep Kids Fed Act in Congress to ensure continued access to meals for children, both during the school year and summer months,” said U.S. Rep. John B. Larson. “I admire End Hunger Connecticut! and all our community partners’ tireless work to promote childhood nutrition and advocate for our kids.”

End Hunger CT! works alongside the CSDE to promote the free Summer Meals Program during the summer months. EHC! also operates a statewide SNAP call center in partnership with the Connecticut Department of Social Services.

The experiences of school nutrition directors were highlighted during the discussion. Their stories shed light on the essential role schools played as nutrition departments continued to serve thousands of meals despite the pandemic and persistent challenges.

“For the last two years, school nutrition professionals have tirelessly and successfully provided healthy school meals for all students. As participation increased across the state it became obvious that when school meals were offered to all it highlighted the fact that school meals are essential and have a direct impact on students,” said Erin Perpetua, School Nutrition Association of CT President, and School Food Service Director of Norwich Public Schools.

“SFSP provided meals to 4.7 million children each day across more than 37,000 sites in July of 2020 [nationwide]. Overall, in FY 2020, the SFSP served about 1.3 billion meals and snacks...The program expanded rapidly in the early months of the pandemic, serving about 564.4 million meals from March through May 2020. Comparatively, only 1.2 million meals were served over the same period in 2019,” according to the USDA.

Perpetua continued, “We all know that children need to be nourished to be able to learn and concentrate, they deserve to be able to rely on healthy and nutritious meals at school daily. Studies have shown that school meals are the most balanced nutritious meals students eat throughout their day. Families are provided with the essential tools for their children to succeed at school including education, books, electronics and transportation. We need to include meals as part of their school day so all children have equal access to proper nutrition. The School Nutrition Association of Connecticut is excited to work with our local partners to work towards Healthy School Meals for All.”

CT Summer Meals is federally funded by the USDA and administered by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). EHC! promotes the CT Summer Meals Program in partnership with CSDE. Meals sites are individually operated by summer meals sponsors. Please confirm your site’s details as meal site locations, meals, and times vary. To find the closest summer meals site near you, visit www.CTSummerMeals.org, call 211, or text the word “Food” to 304-304. Families can also follow @CTSummerMeals on social media for more information about the CT Summer Meals Program.

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End Hunger Connecticut! is a statewide anti-hunger and food security organization. By focusing on advocacy, outreach, education, and research, EHC! serves as a comprehensive anti-hunger resource for policymakers, community organizations, and low-income families. Our mission is to end hunger in Connecticut through legislative and administrative advocacy, outreach, and public education. EHC! is committed to providing and sustaining a culture of safety, offering clear expectations and a non-judgmental environment rooted in integrity, reliability, and generosity in the workplace. Learn more about EHC!’s work at www.endhungerct.org and on all social media platforms (@endhungerct).

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