



Child Hunger Outreach Specialist Debra Marshall stands with McGruff the Crime Dog at a Summer Feeding Program kickoff event.

Feeding Children

SUMMER FOOD PROGRAM SETS UP MEAL SITES ACROSS HENDERSON COUNTY

Story and photos by Michael V. Hannigan

It looked like a celebration last month in north Athens, and it was. There were all the trimmings, including games, face painting, bounce houses, music and food. The mayor, a judge and a constable all turned out.

But the party at Lil Angels Giving Back to the Community on North Prairieville Street had a very serious goal: Eliminating hunger in children. The event was a kickoff to the Summer Food Program being conducted across Henderson County — and the state — by Baylor University's Texas Hunger Initiative (THI).

"I wanted the community to know that there are facilities here [and throughout Henderson County] that are open to the community, that are serving meals," said THI Child Hunger Outreach Specialist Debra Marshall, who is leading the program in the area.

The program will run Monday through Friday until Aug. 15 and will serve free summer meals that meet federal nutrition guidelines for all kids and teens ages 18 and younger. The meals are available to anyone 18 and under, regardless of income or address.

"I'm pleased that we have the Texas Hunger Initiative in our community to help provide free meals to children this summer," said Mayor Jerry Don Vaught, who served the first meal. "I hope we can get the word out through our city and Henderson County that this program is available this summer."

Child hunger is a terrible problem in Texas, particularly in the summer. According to THI, "one in four children in Texas does not know whether or not he or she will have food for their next meal, a condition known as food insecurity."

In the summer the problem is exacerbated because the more than 2.4 million Texas students who are on the free or reduced meal program while at school now have no resources to fill the gap.

According to "Map the Meal Gap" from Feeding America, 27.5 percent — almost 5,000 — of the children in Henderson County are food insecure and 75 percent are eligible for nutrition programs.

"A lot of the kids in this area do not receive a meal during the summer and so this was a prime area where a summer meals site was needed," said Marshall, who plans to do more than provide meals.

"We are also going to be doing educational activities, because I'm a firm believer you really have to start educating our kids and the families because that is the only way you can decrease hunger and poverty," she said.

Marshall said she has met with many of the people in the community, including business owners and church leaders, and received great support.



Athens Mayor Jerry Don Vaught handed out the first meal of the summer at one of the many sites across the county.

“I emphasize to them that I am really about education. We are going to do fun games, and we’re going to do educational fun games. It is going to be fun, but it is going to be educational too,” she said. “When those kids go back to school in August, those teachers are going to see a difference in some children’s math; they are going to see a difference in some children’s reading, and those are all things they need to be successful.”

In addition to the meal sites listed on the accompanying sidebar, there are other locations that provide noon meals three or four times a week and, in some cases, breakfast. The simplest way to get site information is to call 211 and ask where the nearest summer feeding sites are.

Texas & Hunger By the Number

Texas has a household food insecurity rate — 18.4% measured from 2010-2012 — that is significantly higher than the national average (along with six other states).

Texas’s child food insecurity rate in 2011 was 27.6%, which includes 1,849,060 children and places Texas 9th highest in child food insecurity in the nation.

More than one in six Texans, 4.8 million people (17.9%), lives in poverty.

More than \$6 billion of private and state funds designated for hunger-related programs in Texas went unused in 2010.

In 2010, less than 73% of Texans who were eligible for SNAP participated in the program.

Only 11% of the 2.4 million Texas children who qualify for free or reduced priced meals during the school year participate in the summer meals program.

Michael Hannigan is the editor of Henderson County Now, an online news journal. Visit it at HendersonCountyTexasNow.com.

MEAL SITES

Unless otherwise noted, meals are served from noon-1 and a snack from 3-3:30 Monday through Friday through Aug. 15. Everyone 18 and under is eligible. For additional food site information, dial 211.

Athens

Lil Angels Giving Back to the Community,
801 N. Prairieville Street

Fairview Apartments, 160 Gibson Rd

West Hyland Apartments,
737 W. College Street

Bible Way Baptist Church, 404 MLK Jr. Blvd

Gun Barrel City

Tamarack Community Park,
206 Spring Valley Street (11am-noon)

Mabank (through Aug. 22)

Cherokee Shores Community Park,
304 N. Cherokee Shores Dr.

Golden Oaks Community Park,
169 Golden Oaks Dr.

Malakoff

Three T Apartments, 100 Sunset Street

Murchison

Hickory Hills Subdivision, 141 Hickory Hills Dr.

Trinidad

Trinidad Housing Authority, 144 Park Street

