

Dinner is served ... for free

Food bank program takes up supper hour at Boys and Girls Clubs

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Dinner was chicken, peas and carrots, bread and applesauce for Dedrick Stansbury and Michael Peskia of Annapolis.



Joshua McKerrow – The Capital Members of the Bates Boys and Girls Club in Annapolis eat a free hot supper of chicken, peas and carrots earlier this week. The Maryland Food Bank began offering the federally subsidized meals for at-risk children in January and is hoping to expand the program to more county sites.

And it was free.

Both boys are 13 years old, and both are members of the Bates Boys and Girls Club in Annapolis, which in January began offering federally subsidized suppers to its members.

Organizers say the meals ensure at-risk children receive a hot meal between leaving school in the afternoon and returning the next morning. Dedrick and Michael said they should serve more chicken teriyaki.

"I think it's helpful for when your parents can't provide food at certain times," Dedrick said of the supper program.

"It's good because kids need to eat," added Michael, who polished off everything except the peas and carrots.

The At-Risk Afterschool Supper Program is funded by the federal government through the State Department of Education. In Anne Arundel County, the Maryland Food Bank started running the program in January at all five of the county Boys and Girls Clubs.

Previously, the Bates club was serving its members after-school snacks like cheese and crackers, or granola bars and juice. The full, hot meals are much better, said Magdalene Garcia, program director at the club. Each is a balanced meal with a meat and a starch, plus fruit, vegetables and milk.

"A lot of times, we're not sure the kids have something to eat when they get home," she said. "Now we can give them not just a snack, but a meal."

At first Garcia and the other organizers served all 100 to 120 children who come to the Bates club each evening. Then they realized that while some children scarfed down the meals, others didn't want them. Now the suppers are an option, and each night about 75 children take part, she said.

Statewide, sites qualify for the supper program by serving children from at least one school where more than 50 percent of the student body qualifies for the federal government's free and reduced meals program. Annapolis has several schools that fit that description, including

Mills-Parole Elementary, where 7-year-old Mikiyon Butler is in second grade.

Over dinner Monday, she said sometimes she eats at home and sometimes she eats at the club. John Shaia, director of programs for the Maryland Food Bank, said not all children are so lucky.

"For most of the kids, the most food they get is in school. It's the out-of-school time when they're hungry," he said. The snacks were good, he added, but "to elevate that to a full, hot meal, you can see why we jumped all over it."

Over the summer, the food bank is scouting for new county sites that can offer the supper program. Organizers hope it will expand and feed more children, Shaia said.

In the meantime, members of the Bates club will have to make do. The club provides them with breakfast and lunch during the summer through another federally funded food bank program, but the dinners won't reappear until the fall.

For Nicheala Turner, an 8-year-old Georgetown East student, that means more meals at home, or in restaurants, or in fast-food restaurants. That's where she eats dinner if she isn't at Bates, she said.

Which one serves a better dinner is a tough call, she said.

"Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't" best at Bates, she said. "Because they fuss at people if they get two plates."

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