

This is a printer friendly version of an article from the **The Greenville News**  
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

---

Thousands of kids miss free meals  
*21% of eligible children participate in program that leaves millions unspent*

Published: Friday, July 14, 2006 - 2:00 am  
Updated: Friday, July 14, 2006 - 2:07 am

By Ron Barnett  
STAFF WRITER  
[rbarnett@greenvillenews.com](mailto:rbarnett@greenvillenews.com)

Thousands of Upstate children aren't getting enough to eat this summer, even though they could receive free meals through the same federal program that offers free and reduced-price lunches in public schools the rest of the year.

In Greenville County, 28,000 children qualify for the summer nutrition program, based on family income, but only about 1,200 -- 4 percent -- are taking advantage of it, according to school district figures.

"I feel sad for the children because (parents) don't bring them," said Gracie Brown, food service supervisor at the West Greenville Community Center, one of the 23 summer lunch sites operated by the school district. "And these kids need this."

The school district took over the program from the county this year and didn't send notes home with children notifying parents because it was focused on getting the program operating first, said Eileen Staples, director of food and nutrition services for the district.

**Advertisement**      Most of the sites are the same as in previous years.

The Greenville Community Center serves 75-80 kids a day but could feed up to 100, said the Rev. James Hallums, director.

"There's still a lot of hungry people out here," he said. "I think the only reasons the numbers might be going down is it's not publicized enough to the general public."

At least 50 other sites in Greenville County are operated through the state Department of Social Services by the Allen Temple Community Development Center and Spartanburg Terrace, according to Linda Martin, director of DSS's division of family assistance.

Still, only 21 percent of children statewide who are eligible are participating in the program, according to a report released Thursday.

Greenville County and South Carolina aren't alone in leaving thousands or millions of federal dollars on the table while kids go hungry.

Participation in the U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded summer food program has declined nationally for seven years in a row, with 18 percent of eligible children eating at a site last summer. An additional 3.5 million children could have been fed, using \$188.8 million in federal money that was available.

That's according to the report "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation" released Thursday by the Washington-based nonprofit Food Research and Action Center.



The report says that nearly 54,000 additional children in South Carolina could have received free meals last July if just 40 percent of eligible kids participated in the program.

"Forty percent is certainly possible," said Lynn Parker, director of child nutrition programs for the Food Research and Action Center.

While the number of children living in poverty was increasing, the number benefiting from the program statewide fell by 12 percent between 2000 to 2005, from 70,126 to 61,713, according to the report.

Part of the problem is federal red tape, according to the report and Susan Douglas, the director of Loaves and Fishes, a Greenville-based hunger relief agency.

Although nearly half of the states have gotten a federal designation that reduces the paperwork and maximizes reimbursement -- and participation has risen dramatically in those states -- South Carolina isn't among them.

Since that program went into effect in 2001, participation in 13 states that were first included in the program rose by 41 percent. During the same time period, participation fell by 12 percent in the rest of the states.

"We have a long way to go to put food in all the tummies of hungry kids in the summer, not to mention year round," Douglas said.

The Food Research and Action Center is calling for Congress to take action on behalf of the rest of the states.

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-Greenville, noted that South Carolina ranked 16th nationally in participation in the federal summer nutrition program.

"That's lots of sponsors and agencies working hard to meet an important need," he said. "Simplifying the rules may make it even easier for sponsors and agencies to participate, and efforts are under way to streamline the process."

But Congress should be cautious in expanding the simplified rules, which allow sponsors to receive reimbursement without requiring them to report their costs for operating the program, a position statement released by Inglis' staff says.

Sen. Lindsey Graham hasn't reviewed the report, his office said, and Sen. Jim DeMint's press office couldn't reach him for a response Thursday.

Although South Carolina isn't among the 26 states now included in the Simplified Summer Food Program, the Greenville County School District this year took over the summer nutrition program under what is called the Seamless Summer Food Option.

That allows school districts to continue operating under the same rules during the summer as they do the rest of the year rather than go through extra paperwork for a summer program, according to the U.S Department of Agriculture.

"We've been working very hard to increase participation in the program," said USDA spokeswoman Suanne Buggy. "We certainly know that hunger doesn't take a summer vacation."

---