

Texas Hunger Initiative pilots rural food distribution project

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EUSTACE—This summer, 16,871 boxes of food arrived at the homes of Henderson County schoolchildren in East Texas at no cost to their families.

Each box contained enough nutritious food for five breakfasts, five midday or evening meals, and five snacks.

“The fact that these food boxes were delivered directly to the parent’s address—that’s the game-changer,” said Coy Holcombe, superintendent of the Eustace Independent School District. “It made all the difference that they were delivered directly to each student’s house.”

Holcombe noted numerous reports from mothers whose children eagerly awaited the arrival of each food box.

“It was just like Christmas morning, and it happened every week,” he said.

Pilot program in selected rural counties



Coy Holcombe (2nd from left), superintendent of the Eustace Independent School District, participates in a community roundtable regarding the Meals to You pilot rural food distribution program. He is pictured with (left to right) Jeremy Everett, founding executive director of the Texas Hunger Initiative at Baylor University; Brandon Lipps, acting deputy undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture; and Bill Ludwig, regional administrator for USDA. (Photo / Ken Camp)

The 6,690 boxes for students in his district were among 32,596 boxes of food delivered to students in selected rural counties throughout Texas who participated in the Meals to You pilot program. The U.S. Department of Agriculture sponsored the program, spearheaded by the [Texas Hunger Initiative](#) at Baylor University.

“The [Summer Food Service](#) program is fairly easy to administer in urban areas” where students can walk to neighborhood churches, recreation centers or other nearby locations for free summer lunches, said Bill Ludwig, regional administrator for the USDA. “But we’ve struggled with what to do for rural kids.”

When the Texas Hunger Initiative proposed a program to deliver food boxes directly to the homes of rural students, leaders recognized the challenges.

So, they enlisted the expertise of McLane Hunger Solutions, a division of McLane Global, to guide the logistics of packaging and delivery.

'Game-changer for rural America'

"When we work together, we can solve the problems that seem to be pressing in on us," said [Jeremy Everett](#), founding executive director of the Texas Hunger Initiative.

Brandon Lipps, acting deputy undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services at the USDA, noted proposals typically take a long time to be approved in Washington, D.C., but Meals to You was expedited.

"When you see the opportunity for innovation like this, you don't need to wait two years to make it happen," Lipps said. "This can be the game-changer for rural America."

The Meals to You pilot project received final approval just two weeks before school dismissed for the summer, but school administrators immediately made every effort to communicate its availability to families in their districts, said Craig Nash, child hunger outreach specialist for the Texas Hunger Initiative's Waco office.

Grateful community fills school cafetorium



Jeremy Everett (left), founding executive director of the Texas Hunger Initiative at Baylor University, participates in a community roundtable discussion with Coy Holcombe, superintendent of the Eustace Independent School District. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Parents and community leaders who filled the cafetorium at Eustace Primary School on Aug. 13 for a roundtable event with the sponsors expressed appreciation to their local school district and the agencies that made Meals to You possible.

Under the USDA Community Eligibility Provision, school districts with a high percentage of students who would qualify for free or reduced meals are eligible to serve all enrolled students. So, the Eustace Independent School District was able to offer the Meals to You program to all its students.

"We were so blessed to have been able to participate in the program," Holcombe told the representatives from the USDA and the Texas Hunger Initiative. "I hope you can continue it and can expand it."

Mothers describe the impact

Several single mothers who benefited from Meals to You spoke at the event in Eustace. While they were aware of a summer feeding program at Eustace High School, none had participated in it. One of the mothers mentioned how impractical it was to load her three children into a car with no working air-conditioning to travel at least 15 or 20 minutes into town.



Grace Norman (right) from the Texas Hunger Initiative listens as mothers whose children participated in the Meals to You pilot program told about their experiences. (Photo / Ken Camp)

In contrast, they described how eager their children were to receive the weekly boxes of food—particularly the cereal, milk and fruit juice.

A teacher in the audience whose children participated in Meals to You described how she struggled with summer grocery bills in recent years. This year, her grocery costs were cut by more than half—and her children appreciated the fruit juice boxes and snacks Meals to You provided.

"A huge bonus was that the kids said it was 'cool food, not the stuff Mom buys,'" she said.

One mother noted the UPS delivery man "seemed overwhelmed" by all the boxes he was delivering this summer.

Lipps noted he hopes in coming years "the UPS guys in other states will be having fits with this," as Meals to You expands in other rural regions.

Reflecting on what he heard during the roundtable session in Eustace, Lipps said: "It's obvious the impact this program had on hungry children in this rural community. I hope we have the opportunity to replicate it around the country."