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## More hungry families visit summer feeding sites

Recession » Families say economy is squeezing budgets.

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake Tribune

Updated:06/15/2010 11:27:32 PM MDT

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Like many parents in this economy, Heather Deffendol tries to save dollars wherever she can.

This summer, the mother of four is saving cash by taking her kids several times a week to Salt Lake City's Fairmont Park for free meals through the federally-funded Summer Food Service Program. She estimates the program saves her about \$48 a week.

"It's a tank of gas," said Deffendol, whose family has also cut back on travel and driving during the recession. "You have to save money these days with a family of four."

Many families feel the same way.

The Salt Lake City School District is already serving nearly 25 percent more meals a day on average than it served at this time last year at its 63 summer food sites, said Kelly Orton, district director of support services. And the Davis District is serving about 13 percent more meals at its seven sites, said Shauna Lund, district spokeswoman. The Weber School District, however, isn't seeing much change so far compared with last year at its 10 sites, said Kathy Harris, district food service director.

Statewide, the free meals are being served at about 175 schools, parks and other locations to anyone 18 and younger, regardless of income. To get the meals, all kids have to do is show up.

This past school year, about 36 percent of all Utah public school children qualified for free and reduced price meals at school. The summer program is a way to keep those kids from going hungry when school is out.

"During the summer, the kids who depend on getting their meals at school lose access to those foods," said Gina Cornia, executive director of Utahns Against Hunger. Cornia said that statewide one in seven households has trouble affording food.

"More and more families just need that extra little help," she said.

Abigail Müller has been bringing her four children to the program for years. Her oldest daughter, Sarah Müller, 16, said it's become a family tradition to eat the lunches in the park on pleasant summer days.

But in recent years, it's become increasingly important to the family as they work to pay school fees, rising health insurance costs and rent in this recession.

"They get free lunch at school during the school year and then when they're off during the summer for three months, we're not used to spending [money] on lunch for everyone," Müller said. "Everything goes up in price, but the money doesn't."

Many families also participate in the program as a way to get their kids outside and because the meals are healthy. On Tuesday, kids ate chicken sandwiches, apples, pretzels, carrots and milk. Parents can also get lunches, but at a cost of \$3. On Tuesday at Fairmont Park, many families ate the lunches with friends and relatives on picnic blankets. After they finished eating, children ran to the playground equipment.

During the past three years, more families have been taking advantage of the program. Last summer alone, sites throughout the state served 1.2 million meals -- a nearly 14 percent increase over the previous summer.

Charlene Allert, assistant director of Child Nutrition Programs at the State Office of Education, said she's not surprised Salt Lake City School District -- the largest provider of summer food program meals in the state -- is seeing an increase. She said she expects statewide providers will serve more meals this summer than last.

In some cases, demand is outpacing supply. At some Salt Lake City School District sites Tuesday, the district ran out

of meals. At Fairmont Park, the district had to turn away 39 kids, Orton said. He said the district will continue to adjust the number of meals available at each site as demand changes.

"I think a lot of families are just getting to the point where they just need help and can't make ends meet anymore," Cornia said.

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Find a Summer Food program near you

To find a Summer Food Program in your area go to [www.uah.org](http://www.uah.org) or call 1-800-453-3663. Kids 18 and under eat free while adults must pay a small fee. Some sites also offer breakfast, snacks and dinner as well as lunch.

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