BY US SENATOR

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For too many Ohio children, summer break doesn't just mean a break from homework; it also means a break from a dependable source of nutritious food. That's because for more than 800,000 Ohio children, hunger isn't something that happens in another country. Many of these children come from families that are food insecure—meaning they don't always know when they'll get their next meal. These children know how difficult it is to focus on learning while trying to ignore the pangs of an empty stomach.

Thankfully, qualifying children can receive nutrition assistance through free or reduced-price lunches during the academic year. However, when the school cafeterias close for the summer, these children are still in dire need of a nutritious meal or snack.

That's why the Summer Food Service Program – which provides breakfast, lunch, or a snack for children under 18 – is so important. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) work together to ensure that children have access to the food they need to keep growing and learning during the summer months.

However, too many Ohio families still don't know about this critical program. In 2011, only 66,000 Ohio children per day utilized the Summer Food Service Program—even though hundreds of thousands need and receive nutrition assistance during the school year.

Summer break shouldn't mean a break from good nutrition. That's why I'm working to raise awareness and increase access to the program for all Ohio children in low-income families — regardless of where they live.

There are about 1,200 sites across 79 counties that can help. At approved schools, summer camps, churches and synagogues, community centers, and pools and recreation centers, volunteers and organizers are ensuring our children have the healthy food they need to succeed.

And although nine Ohio counties currently lack summer food service program sites, it's not too late for potential sponsors to set up a program in their town. Interested sponsors and volunteers can still work with the Ohio Department of Education to establish new centers for children to get meals.

But while this is a good start, we can do even more to help. That's why, a few years ago, I co-hosted a first-of-its-kind hunger summit at the Mid-Ohio Foodbank with leading anti-hunger advocates from across Ohio. Rather than lament a growing problem, we discussed how Ohio stakeholders can work together to increase the number of community leaders, sponsors, volunteers, and sites that can provide children with nutritious meals during both the school year and summer months.

The single biggest thing we can do is to make sure more people know about this program. Outreach and public awareness are critical components to ensure that the end of the school year doesn't mean an end to healthy meals.

For the most up-to-date list of summer food service program sites, Ohioans should visit the ODE website at oh.cnpcares.com/summer/SfspFoodServByCnty.asp, or call the National Hunger Hotline at 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE. Ohioans can also visit my website at www.brown.senate.gov for more information and a complete list of county-by-county sites.