Spread the word! Free summer meals

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By Jacqueline Wayans

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As a former food stamp recipient and a mom who uses great savvy to feed my three kids, I was encouraged and empowered at this week's Hung Hunger Crisis Forum to hear Margarette Purvis, president and CEO of Food Bank For New York City say: "No one should feel shame just because they don't have enough money [to adequately feed their family]." The Hunger Crisis Forum took place the same week that the annual Free Summer Meals Program [PDF] kicks off.

An all-female panel of CEO's discussed rising food prices and the increasing number of parents struggling to feed their families. In fact, they said, many educated and middle class families find themselves using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for the first time.

At least 80% of students in NYC public school qualify for free lunch. In response to the growing need, the United States Department of Agriculture is spending $400 million on the *Summer Meals Program* which starts in New York City on June 27. Yet only 16 percent of eligible children are expected to participate. Why? According to speakers at the forum, that "stigma" and "embarrassment" often keep people from taking advantage of the services.

The Food Bank for New York City and the National Dairy Council, which are helping to administer the summer meals program, are launching campaigns to raise awareness about the program using volunteers, flyers and even New York Yankees baseball players to get the word out.

Jaime Koppel of the Children's Defense Fund shared her personal experience as a child receiving supplemental food assistance and noted that children who are hungry may not perform as well at school. "Food insecurity in the early years has been linked to students' low test and class performance [as early as] the 3rd grade," she said. Beth Finkel, director of AARP NY noted that increasing numbers of grandparents are raising grandchildren with their limited social security income and need extra food support.

When my children were younger, I remember breathing easier during the school year because they received breakfast and lunch at school. However when summer rolled around, I had to figure out how to adjust my menu and stretch the dollars to provide all their meals. Though I tried my best, not all of those meals were the most nutritious. Jennifer Jones Austin, CEO of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies put it best at the forum when she said, "Resources affect choices, often times when you see that child with a bag of chips in the morning, that was the best that mother could do."

The Summer Meals Program provides a way for families to get healthy meals. It starts on June 27 - the day after school is out - and goes through Aug. 30. Any children 18 years old or younger may get a free breakfast and lunch at participating schools, pools and parks. No ID is required. Breakfast and lunch are also available to all children attending summer school. For more details, and a list of sites see the DOE's website. This year there will also be three mobile food trucks visiting parks and beaches at lunchtime.

For those who don't need the services, spread the word to those who need a helping hand. You can also support the Food Bank with a donation. If you donate by July 12, Delta Air Lines will match your gift, up to a total of $50,000.

Jacqueline Wayans is a co-author of the New York City Best Public School Guides. The mom of three public school children, she

graduated from Columbia University in 2008.