

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Utilizes \$75M in CRF to Support School Nutrition Programs



Volunteers Prepare and Distribute Meals as Part of School Nutrition Program

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) received \$75 million in Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) to support School Nutrition Services' response to the public health nutrition crisis in our state. As of February 28, 2021, the DPI and School Nutrition Services program has served 143,402,895 meals to children/students and is positioned to exceed 150 million meals as of March 31, 2021.

This legislatively appropriated support was important for so many reasons and there are more success stories than can be counted. One success story in particular is the use of yellow school buses to deliver meals to children/students, as transportation was a huge barrier to accessing food and meals. Many of the most food-insecure children were in rural communities where it was difficult to get transportation to a school or community site to pick up food and meals. School buses allowed meals to be delivered to neighborhoods and distributed to children using typical bus routes.

Buses were also used as nutrition hubs where schools and community organizations would work together to support the food and nutrition needs of the children and their families. The school bus would provide meals for children, while the community organization would set up a tent and provide food boxes for the adults in the household. In most cases, buses would stop in an economically distressed area of a county or in a public housing community. At one point, there were over 75 members of the North Carolina National Guard working with schools to help deliver meals using yellow school buses.

To maximize this valuable resource, the buses that were parked in these remote communities or other sites were also equipped with WiFi devices (as a result of another source of CARES Act funds) to enable children to use their electronic devices for web-based, virtual instruction.

North Carolina has the eighth highest incidence of child food insecurity and hunger in the country. Nearly 60% of students enrolled in NC public schools are economically disadvantaged and depend upon meals at school for their primary source of nourishment. In February 2020, the level of food insecurity in NC was 11.7%; in June 2020, the level of food insecurity and, in many cases, chronic hunger had more than doubled to 24.5%.

The buses were a critical lifeline during the pandemic, as were the School Nutrition and Pupil Transportation Heroes and all volunteers who prepared and served the meals.