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Last year, Harford had 14 sites offering free summer meals to kids. This year, it's dropped to 7



The Epicenter at Edgewood. (Matthew Hubbard/Staff)



By **MATT HUBBARD** | mhubbard@baltsun.com

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Four kids, ages 8, 10, 12 and 17, headed to the Edgewood Epicenter Thursday to pick up a free lunch offered by the Harford County Public School system's summer meals program. But the doors were locked and the kids found out they'd have to walk more than an hour to Edgewood Library instead to get their food.

Last year, Harford schools had 14 sites offering meals to students. This year, that number dropped to seven. The Edgewood Epicenter was one of the sites that was dropped, which the kids said they didn't know about.

Visibly exhausted and confused, they dropped their shoulders in defeat and called their mother.

"We rely on the free lunch so they can eat," said Charlisa Carter, who was at work when she answered her daughter's video call. "No one is making it convenient for parents who work whose kids have to walk to get meals."

Carter said her children would go back home and “find something” to eat since walking over an hour in the heat and along busy roadways was not going to work for them.

For more than 30 years, Harford County Public Schools has participated in the Summer Food Service Program, designed to provide meals to children under the age of 18 living in underserved communities, when school is not in session.

The program is federally funded and administered by the state in districts that opt to sponsor the program. Sponsoring districts such as Harford County Public Schools coordinate the program by ensuring there are enough meals at each site as well as staff to distribute food.

Sites are classified into three categories by the U.S. Department of Agriculture: open sites, which provide meals to any child at the site; enrolled sites, which provide meals to children in programs where at least half the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals with the school system; or camps that participate in the Summer Food Service Program.

Per federal requirements, open sites must operate in low-income areas where at least half of the children come from families of four or more with an annual income of less than \$60,000.

The district’s public information specialist, Kyle Andersen, said the reduction in the number of locations did not stem from federal funding cuts but from decisions by community partners who host programs.

“Several locations that have been open to the public in the past are now operating as closed sites,” Andersen said. “These sites are still participating in the Summer Food Service Program providing meals to the children enrolled in their summer programs.”

These Harford County locations will give out meals this summer:

- Havre de Grace Public Library, through Aug. 21, Mondays-Thursdays, noon-1 p.m.
- Aberdeen Public Library, through Aug. 21, Mondays-Thursdays, noon-1 p.m.
- Joppatowne Public Library, through Aug. 22, Mondays-Fridays, noon-1 p.m.
- Edgewood Public Library, through Aug. 21, Mondays-Thursdays, noon-1 p.m.
- Halls Cross Roads Elementary, through Aug. 14, Mondays-Thursdays, 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Hess Enterprises, 15 Plaza Court, Suite 15, in Aberdeen will offer free breakfast and lunches June 30 to Aug. 21, Mondays through Thursdays. Breakfast will be from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. and lunch will be from 11 a.m. to noon.

All meals must be consumed onsite, per program regulations.

The only site offering to-go meals is Dublin Elementary. Children receive a seven-day meal kit each Wednesday but are required to be pre-registered for pickups.

Any community organizations interested in hosting a Summer Food Service Program location can call 410-638-4078.