

# Partner Spotlight: Summer Food Launches in the Rio Grande Valley

Summer is here and without school meals to depend on, too many kids don't have access to a nutritious meal. The Summer Food Service Program provides kids in low-income areas a free nutritious meal or snack each day while school is not in session.

An expanded partnership among USDA FNS, Texas Department of Agriculture and Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley can potentially triple the number of kids served this summer through the Summer Food Service Program in the Rio Grande Valley.

Initially Catholic Charities had identified more than a dozen locations, but with encouragement and assistance from USDA Director of the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Max Finberg and USDA Food and Nutrition Service Southwest Regional Administrator Bill Ludwig, the organization agreed to take on more sites. Finberg brought in partners from Buckner Family Service and representatives from Texas A&M University's Center for Housing and Urban Development Colonias Program to suggest additional areas where there was extreme need.

"We're up for the challenge of serving additional program sites," said Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley.

Hidalgo County is considered one of the most poverty-stricken areas in the U.S. with a per-capita income among the lowest in the nation. In 2009, the New York Times reported that Hidalgo County, along with the Bronx in New York, had the greatest share of people receiving benefits



**Lunch time:** Local San Juan area children sample the nutritious meals distributed to more than 1,500 children at feeding sites this summer.

from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, in America – 29 percent of residents.

Hidalgo, along with Cameron, Willacy and Starr counties, make up a region along the Texas-Mexico border called the Rio Grande Valley. More than 95 percent of the region is Hispanic and unemployment rates hover at 12 percent.

Many seek help from local food pantries and churches. Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley's network of food pantries and counseling centers have helped many Latino families in times of crisis. Catholic Charities will also help USDA FNS with SNAP outreach at its food pantry sites.

USDA FNS officials were successful in tearing down a myth that had prevented the local Catholic Diocese from benefiting from USDA's most widely-used programs. Sister Pimentel thought that the

School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program were off limits to private schools. Not so. Finberg and Ludwig encouraged Pimentel to enroll her 12 Catholic schools in time for the 2011-2012 academic year.

Catholic Charities also agreed to sponsor 25 feeding locations this summer. Sites are located throughout Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy counties. An estimated 1,500 children will be served snacks and/or lunches. A press conference in the historic national Shrine of the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan Del Valle was held with Catholic leaders and local elected officials in attendance.

The agency partnered with other communities to set up sites in rural areas and colonias (unincorporated areas outside of cities where there is no running water or sewage system). This is a great sign of hope for those residents having a hard time getting access to assistance.

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*More information about the Summer Food Service Program is available at <http://www.summerfood.usda.gov/> ♦*



**Faith:** Bishop Daniel Flores addresses local San Juan children in the historic national Shrine of the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan Del Valle, the target of the summer feeding initiative around the Rio Grande Valley.