

WAUKEGAN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 60

Program distributes free food while school is out



Volunteers load the back of a car during a winter break food distribution for Waukegan Community Unit School District 60.



Santa Claus helped with a food distribution for Waukegan schoolchildren.
Steve Sadin/News-Sun photos

BY STEVE SADIN LAKE COUNTY NEWS-SUN

Within 90 minutes, hundreds of cars drove through the parking lot at Waukegan High School's Brookside Campus to receive two weeks' worth of

breakfasts and lunches for more than 700 Waukegan Community Unit School District 60 students.

Alicia Williams, the district's manager of transportation and childhood nutrition, said Saturday's food distribution is a winter break continuation of the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) program, giving free breakfast and lunch during the school year to districts in low-income areas.

Though not required, Williams said the district continues to distribute the breakfasts and lunches during winter and spring breaks, as well as making provisions during much of the summer.

"We know our students are off for two weeks," she said. "We want to make sure they have well-balanced meals throughout winter break. They get 10 breakfasts, 10 lunches and snacks."

Williams, along with a group of volunteers from both the district and food provider Sodexo, loaded more than 7,000 meals into recipients' cars Saturday at the high school's Brookside campus in Waukegan to help feed the youngsters during winter break. Though District 60 students have received CEP meals for more than 10 years, Nick Alatzakis, the district's communications director and one of the volunteers, said distributing meals during school breaks is a newer effort.

When the schools closed in March 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, Alatzakis said administrators began to look for ways to feed children as they would if class was in session.

Deliveries were made to specific locations where parents could get the food.

"We wanted to find a way to continue because we knew the need was there," he said. "We worked with our food provider to find a way to provide the meals."

Williams said the 10 breakfasts consist of cereal bars, fruit and chips. Lunches include protein like beef sticks or cheese, vegetables and juice.

Gabriele Ramirez drove through the line to get meals for her first grader. She said the added food is helpful, both economically and emotionally, removing potential stress for the family. Coming around Christmas is also a plus.

"It really helps us right now with meals for her," Ramirez said. "It helps so we have a little more for Christmas."

Humberto Ballares drove through the line with his mother. Out of school now and working, he said the three boxes of meals were for his three sisters. He also said the meals will help the family around Christmas.

“It’s going to supplement the holiday,” Ballares said.

Among the volunteers handing out meals was Santa Claus. He said everything was under control at the North Pole and coming to Waukegan was another way to make children happy a few days before Christmas.

“I’m happy to be here in Waukegan helping children,” Santa said, “They see me and know Santa is here. I’ll be back for them Tuesday night. This is all about spreading joy.”

Natalie Richter, Sodexo’s general manager for the area, was also there with members of her crew helping distribute the food. They delivered the meals earlier and stood in the line loading cars. There were enough volunteers to load four at a time, and then another group of four until done.

“This feels special,” Richter said. “It’s important to step up and help.”

Jonathan Brown, the district’s director of assessment and data, was another individual loading boxes into the vehicles.

He said when the call went out for volunteers, it was a chance to do something directly for families. His work does not put him in the classroom.

“It’s nice to see the kids and the families,” Brown said. “It’s a chance to do something for them around the holidays.”