

Maui

A Pandemic Program That Fed Schoolchildren Last Summer Is Now In Jeopardy

Kaukau 4 Keiki was considered a huge success, but the federal rule waiver that made it possible is set to expire June 30.



By Marina Starleaf Riker   / About 13 hours ago

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Last summer, Kaimana Brummel faced a momentous task: Figure out how to source bread, milk, meat and 10 pounds of local fruits and vegetables for hundreds of Maui County families each week, then find staff to pack it into boxes and regularly deliver all of it straight to doorsteps on three different islands.



It was the middle of the pandemic, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture had waived its usual rules so that instead of paying for meals at in-person summer programs when children weren't dining in schools, communities could tap federal dollars to deliver groceries directly to families during breaks.

The program that emerged in Hawaii was [Kaukau 4 Keiki](#), in which organizers

in each county arranged for a week's worth of food for breakfast and lunch to be delivered directly to families.

In Maui County, where schoolchildren live on three different islands, that proved to be a little more complex. So Brummel, who has a background in logistics, got creative. To serve families on Lanai, for example, she borrowed her husband's work van, roped her father into driving it from the packing warehouse in Central Maui to Lahaina and negotiated with a ferry to ship it for free to Lanai every week. From there, she'd find at least three volunteers to unload all of the boxes and deliver them to families across the island — a process that, from warehouse to doorstep, took about five hours.

“I had a mom write me a note last summer,” Brummel said. “She said, ‘A gallon of milk on Lanai is \$10; the fact that I didn't have to spend any money on milk this summer just eased so much pressure on my budget.’”



Courtesy: Bryan Berkowitz/Maui United Way

Maui organizers sourced local produce like bok choy, papaya, bananas and sweet potatoes for weekly boxes.

Hawaii has some of the highest food costs across the U.S., and it's estimated that [1 in every 3 children](#) struggles with hunger. When the program first

started in the summer of 2021, Brummel's team was delivering 600 boxes, a number that soon swelled to 1,500. But besides feeding families, the program offered a chance to support dozens of food producers across Maui; each week, they were tapped to provide fruits and vegetables like banana, papaya, sweet potato and bok choy, along with local beef, eggs and poi.

But the future of the program, which everyone says was an undeniable success, is in jeopardy. In spite of the advocacy from Hawaii's congressional delegation, state officials and nonprofit leaders, the USDA rule waiver that allowed Kaukau 4 Keiki to flourish is set to expire June 30. If Congress doesn't act to extend it, things will go back to how they were before the pandemic — which could mean bussing each child during the summer break to cafeterias so they can eat meals, rather than bringing groceries straight to their doors.



A family of four can expect to spend around \$1,270 per month on groceries, while the national average is about \$670. — Feed Our Keiki; Support Our Schools; Help Our Farmers report

“To think that we're going to lose that because the federal government can't empower communities to come together and feed themselves is incredibly frustrating,” said Brummel. “It's sad because in the end, there are going to be kids going hungry this summer.”

For those who've been advocating to expand access to healthy, local foods for Hawaii's children, this is just the latest example of how the federal rules

aren't keeping up with the reality of rising food costs here — a situation that's left local governments and nonprofits scrambling to get kids the nutrition their growing bodies need.

A [new report released this week](#) found that Hawaii is missing out on millions of dollars in funding from federal nutrition programs. The report, which was put together by Hawaii Appleseed, Hawaii Children's Action Network, Hawaii Afterschool Alliance and Ulupono Initiative, found that the state of Hawaii is spending between \$20 million and \$30 million per year to prop up school nutrition programs, in effect draining resources that could've supported other school programs.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2017

A new report found that Hawaii needs more federal funding to feed its school children.

The report also found that the federal government isn't reimbursing [Hawaii enough to cover the cost of students' meals](#). Instead, the feds are relying on a formula created in 1979 to decide what to pay. And that isn't reflective of how high food costs have soared in Hawaii, compared to the continental U.S. — here, for example, a family of four can expect to spend around \$1,270 per

month on groceries, while the national average is about \$670, the report said.

“The state is falling behind, which means lost federal funding and lack of access to healthy, balanced meals for many Hawaii children,” the report said.

Ideally, the federal government should be reimbursing Hawaii 62% more per meal than communities on the mainland, the report found. The USDA is in the middle of examining its reimbursement rates for school meals in Hawaii, but its findings aren’t expected to be released for a few more years. In the meantime, the report advocated for looking into temporary increases and extending rule waivers that allow more flexibility for nutrition programs, such as those that helped create Kaukau 4 Keiki.

“Nobody knew what an impact that could have — Kaukau was a huge success,” said Daniela Spoto, who runs Hawaii Appleseed’s anti-hunger programs. “It was such a win for families, especially in rural communities who even during normal times wouldn’t be driving their kid to a summer program every day.”



Courtesy: Bryan Berkowitz/Maui United Way

Maui's Kaukau 4 Keiki program delivered a week's worth of groceries to children on three different islands.

In Maui County, the Kaukau 4 Keiki program meant that even families living in remote communities like Hana, Lanai and Molokai could depend on weekly boxes during summer, fall, winter and spring breaks. When standing up the program, Brummel tapped community members in those places who were already working to promote local food production. In Hana, for example, she provided a weekly budget to organizers of the Hana Farmers Market, who negotiated with local farmers and packed their own community's boxes full of produce and eggs grown in Hana.

Brummel said it was empowering to see how the community could work together to feed each other — and support local farmers — in a time of crisis, an exercise she thinks will make Maui better positioned the next time disaster strikes. But running the program also illuminated just how far Hawaii has to go to strengthen its food system and ensure that every child has access to healthy, affordable food.

“Straight up — this program shouldn't exist,” Brummel said. “We should not have to be creating mammoth social community networks to feed kids in Hawaii. It is systemic issues that have gotten us to this place.”

“At the same time,” she continued, “delivering a single box to a family is how I can make a difference.”

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