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Hawaii's keiki nutrition programs facing financial crisis

By Kristen Consillio

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At Lanakila Elementary School dozens of children in the A-plus after school program receive a hot meal every day. For some -- it could be their last meal until tomorrow.

The state is missing out on tens of millions of federal dollars each year to provide meals for needy children.

That's according to a **new report released today** by a local group of nonprofits: Hawaii Appleseed, Hawaii Children's Action Network, the Hawaii Afterschool Alliance and Ulupono Initiative.

Over the past two decades, the report estimates Hawaii has been short changed by more than \$200 million for school meal programs. Federal reimbursements currently don't cover the costs of meals, which the state and charities must then subsidize.

"We could be losing anywhere from \$20 million to \$30 million per year in federal funding," said Daniela Spoto, director of anti-hunger initiatives at Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice. "That's money that could be going towards, you know, other important education expenses, teacher pay, pre-K programs."

Rhuster Banez said afterschool meals for his nine-year-old daughter at the YMCA's A-plus program have helped his family during these tough economic times.

"It's a big help," he said. "Before I used to buy a lot of snack and food at Costco but now because of pandemic and like the high costs of food and everything, I don't even want to see Costco. Because it's hard to afford it even with two working parents."



Mental health worsening for keiki, health experts warn

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reimburses school districts nationwide for nutrition programs at a per meal rate. Hawaii's rate was set back in 1979 and has not been changed since -- except to adjust for inflation, the report said.



COVID-19 vaccine for keiki expected by the summer

By Kristen Consillio

That means many schools and organizations must rely heavily on grants and donations, as well as the state, to make up for the shortfall.

"Supply-chain disruptions, the cost of inflation, the cost of gas, the cost of housing, everything is coming to such a head right now," Spoto added.

"And we're losing programs -- in particular the out-of-school mealtime programs -- the organizations that for summer meals or afterschool suppers or things like that are just dropping out because they can no longer afford to offer these programs."

The nonprofits are urging the federal government to approve an emergency appropriation to cover the full costs of meals for keiki in Hawaii.

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