

STATEN ISLAND

Hunger remains a problem for high school and college students

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One in eight New York City residents were unable to afford an adequate food supply from 2015-2017, according to a study by Hunger Free America.

That figure includes high-school and college-age students, who experts say can sometimes fly under the radar due to their fast-paced schedules and ability to purchase fast, cheap and processed food, lacking the nutrition their body needs.

The issue is being addressed at secondary education institutions on Staten Island, such as Wagner College, which offers a college readiness program that in part addresses food insecurity.

According to the website for St. John's University, which has a campus on Staten Island, "a student's inability to consistently obtain nutritious food is a potentially serious health issue."

The site offers students experiencing food insecurity resources to address it, including links to local food pantries and information about financial assistance.

"From my experience, problems with housing creates many problems with meals," said Sonylma Ramos, a nutritionist at Community Health Center of Richmond (CHCR). "For a large group, adequate housing takes up a large percent of their income leaving a small amount of financial resources for high quality food."

STUDENTS SUPPORTING PARENTS MOST IMPACTED

Students impacted the most tend to be those supporting parents or siblings at home, those living independently for the first time with limited funds and lack of knowledge on how to prepare nutritional meals, and those supporting children at home, experts say.

"The student landscape appears to be changing, with more students entering or returning to school at older ages and/or with young, dependent children," said Lauren Dinour, associate professor of Nutrition and Food Studies at Montclair State University.

And despite a student having a job outside of class, minimum wage always isn't enough to afford a balance diet, and the student might not qualify for government assistance. "Rising costs of college tuition, housing, healthcare, and other basic needs, coupled with low minimum wage rates, means that students have less money to spend on food," said Dinour.

Overall, hunger decreased throughout the city and state over a six-year-period leading up to the study by Hunger Free America, but remained higher than before the recession.

Experts say students' food stability begins with their family at home, before entering college.

At CHCR, Ramos works with families regularly who either are hungry, or settling for food without any nutrients on a regular basis.

When working with immigrants, she said their stories are no different than any families first arriving in New York City, sharing a home "to make ends meet."

"I recommend food pantries," said Ramos. "They're not full of canned foods anymore, and there's always fresh fruit."

With at least 12 food pantries and soup kitchens across the borough, the Staten Island Hunger Task Force was established to advocate for their needs and for non-profit emergency feeding programs.

Fresh produce and cooking demonstrations also are offered on Staten Island at no cost by City Harvest, the city's largest food rescue organization.

According to the group's website, 64 million pounds of food will be rescued this year and delivered free of charge to hundreds of food pantries, soup kitchens and other community partners.