

[By Jack Thurston](#)

At a special public lunch event Friday in Milton, Vt., fruit salad and milk were popular with kids like Jessica Lamonda, 17.

"It gives me energy," she beamed.

In the town just north of Burlington, more than half of children are from families whose incomes qualify them for free or reduced-price school lunches. The worry is those students won't eat as well now that school is out for the summer.

"There's a lot of people out there that don't have the money to go out and buy lunches every day or breakfasts every day," said Mary Littleton, who noted her two children receive meal support during the school year.

Milton just launched a program that will feed kids for eight weeks during school vacation. It's one of more than 200 summer meal sites in Vermont, a state the USDA has praised for addressing hunger concerns.

"There's been a decline in the country in these programs," said Marissa Parisi, the executive director of the nonprofit Hunger Free Vermont. "We still have a lot of work to do in Vermont. We hope to replicate the program we have here in Milton."

With the tense budget climate in Washington, D.C., the future of these federally-funded programs is unclear. The U.S. Senate recently passed a version of the Farm Bill that calls for several billion dollars in cuts to nutrition programs. But the cuts could be deeper when the legislation moves into the U.S. House of Representatives.

Congressman Peter Welch, D-Vt., said Friday he knows reductions are necessary, but pledged to fight to preserve the Senate's levels for nutrition, which he described as reasonable.

"It's an acknowledgment we have to compromise; these are tough budget times," explained Welch. "That's a cut that's real, it'll hurt, but probably [is one] Vermont and the rest of the country can deal with."

Hunger Free Vermont said ensuring students from low-income families have access to more meals in the summer means they'll return to school in the fall better prepared to learn. It's a big weight off mom Mary Littleton's shoulders.

"I think that's going to be good for the kids," she said.