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More than 1 in 4 kids depend on the government for food, and many of them are still left hungry in the summer. In rural Tennessee, one food bank is trying a new solution: delivering lunch.



DRIVING AWAY HUNGER

STORY BY ELI SASLOW, PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON
IN GREENEVILLE, TENN.

It was the first day of summer in a place where summers had become hazardous to a child's health, so the school bus rolled out of the parking lot on its newest emergency route. It passed by the church steeples of downtown and curved into the blue hills of Appalachia. The highway became two lanes. The two lanes turned to red dirt and gravel. On the dashboard of the bus, the driver had posted an aphorism. "Hunger is hidden," it read, and this bus had been dispatched to find it.

The bus was empty except for a box of plastic silverware and three oversize cool-

ers that sat on green vinyl seats. Inside each cooler were 25 sack lunches, and inside each sack was what the federal government had selected on this day as the antidote to a growing epidemic of childhood hunger — 2 ounces of celery sticks, 4 ounces of canned oranges, chocolate milk and a bologna sandwich, each meal bought with \$3.47 in taxpayer money.

On the outside of the bus, the familiar yellow-and-black design had been modified with the bold lettering of the U.S. economy in 2013: "Kids Eat FREE!"

Here, in the rural hills of Tennessee, is

Austin Davis, 1, munches on bread on the Lunch Express bus, which delivers food to poor children around Greeneville, Tenn.

Hannah Knight, 6, left, and Kaylee Arwood, 4, eat their meals on the Lunch Express bus. The meals included Lunchables, apple slices, fruit cups and low-fat chocolate milk. A food bank in Tennessee bought four used school buses to deliver lunch to children around Greeneville who might otherwise go hungry during the summer.



the latest fallout of a recession that officially ended in 2009 but remains without end for so many. More than 1 in 4 children now depend on government food assistance, a record level of need that has increased the federal budget and changed the nature of childhood for the nation's poor.

First, schools became the country's biggest soup kitchens, as free and reduced-price lunch programs expanded to include free breakfast, then free snacks and then free backpacks of canned goods sent home for weekends. Now those programs are extending into summer, even though classes stop, in order for children to have a dependable source of food. Some elementary school buildings stay open year-round so cafeterias can serve low-income students. High schools begin summer programs earlier to offer free breakfast.

And late last month came the newest iteration: a school bus retrofitted into a bread truck bouncing along a potholed road near the Blue Ridge Mountains. It parked in a valley of 30 single-wide trailers — some rotting in the sun, others swallowed by weeds and mosquitoes alongside the Nolichucky River. The driver opened his window and listened to the utter silence. "It feels like a ghost town," he said.

A 5-year-old girl saw the dust trail of

the bus and pedaled toward it on a red tri-cycle. Three teenage boys came barefoot in swimsuits. A young mother walked over from her trailer with an infant daughter in one arm and a lit cigarette in the other. "Any chance there will be leftover food for adults?" she asked.

It was almost 1 p.m. For some, this would be the first meal of the day. For others, the last.

The driver opened the bus door and made the announcement he would repeat at six more trailer parks on this day.

"Lunch is served," he said.

The driver's name was Rick Bible, and his 66-mile route through the hills of Greene County marked the government's latest attempt to solve a rise in childhood hunger that had been worsening for seven consecutive years.

Congress had tried to address it mostly by spending a record \$15 billion each year to feed 21 million low-income children in their schools, but that left out the summer, so the U.S. Department of Agriculture agreed to spend \$400 million more on that. Governors came together to form a task force. Michelle Obama suggested items for a menu. Food banks opened thousands of summer cafes, and still only about 15 per-

Children make their way off the bus after eating. The bus makes seven 15-minute stops in five hours, Mondays through Fridays, delivering 66 sack lunches with 750 calories each. In that part of Tennessee, poverty rates have almost doubled since 2009 and two-thirds of children qualify for free meals.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

cent of eligible children received regular summer meals.

So, earlier this year, a food bank in Tennessee came up with a plan to reverse the model. Instead of relying on children to find their own transportation to summer meal sites, it would bring food to children. The food bank bought four used school buses for \$4,000 each and designed routes that snake through some of the most destitute land in the country, where poverty rates have almost doubled since 2009 and two-thirds of children qualify for free meals.

“We got ketchup?” Bible said now, loading supplies onto the bus before heading out for the day.

“Yes,” said Morgan Anderson, a food bank employee who worked on the bus with him.

“Ice? Hand sanitizer?”

“Yes. Yes.”

Bible and Anderson were beginning their second week together on the route, which made seven regular stops in five hours, Mondays through Fridays, delivering 66 sack lunches with 750 calories each. Government rules required them to stop for 15 minutes at each trailer park to make sure children ate their lunches on the bus. Anderson, 22 and pursuing her master’s degree in dietary studies, tested the temperature of the coolers every hour and kept an inventory of food in a color-coded

binder. Bible, 58 and laid-off from a furniture factory, sneaked extra fruit cups to the kids and told stories as long and winding as their route.

Their job on the bus included enforcing a long list of rules from the USDA: No giving out seconds, because the federal government reimburses only 2 percent of their value. No extra milks. No children taking food home. No free meals for adults over 18 unless they are disabled. On Anderson’s first day, she had watched three men come on board, sweaty and unshaven after a morning working in the strawberry fields. “Are you under 18?” she had asked them. “Yes,” one had said, even though she suspected it was a lie. The men had eaten quickly and left, never returning to the bus on subsequent days, and lately Anderson had begun to worry about them, blaming herself for their absence. Had she scared them away? Were they going hungry because of her? Why had she bothered to ask about their age?

“You learn that there are rules, and then there’s the reality of the people you see on the bus,” Anderson said.

On this day, what she saw at the first stop was five siblings arriving in clothes still stained from the pizza sauce they had been served on the bus the day before. “Did you get a chance to change today?” Anderson asked one of them, a 10-year-old girl.



Rick Bible, 58, drives a Lunch Express bus on its 66-mile route and delivers meals with Morgan Anderson, a food bank employee.

“Into what?” she said.

Next, at the second stop, a 7-year-old whose parents were both at work arrived carrying his 1-year-old sister in nothing but a diaper, spoon-feeding her juice from the bottom of his fruit cocktail cup. “She can’t eat chunks yet,” he said.

At the third stop, a high school football player pleaded for extra milk; at the fourth, teenagers fired rifles at cans up the road; at the fifth, always the most crowded, kids, parents and dogs waited in the shade under the trailer park’s only tree.

“Finally!” one of them said as the bus pulled in. He was a 12-year-old boy, shirtless and muddy with half of a cigarette tucked behind his ear, and he barged onto the bus and grabbed his lunch. “Bologna again?” he asked, studying his sandwich.

“I’ll take yours, then,” another boy said, grabbing for his bag.

“No fighting,” Anderson said, as she handed out 15 meals and walked toward the back of the bus, where a young mother in a tank top and pink slippers was sitting with her 2-year-old son. The mother opened the toddler’s fruit cup and, a minute later, the little boy stood up on his seat, laughed and tossed the fruit cup out the school bus window.

“How dare you?” the mother said, turning to the toddler, slapping his bottom hard enough for the bus to go quiet, then pulling her arm back to slap him again.

“It’s okay,” Anderson said, hurriedly reaching into another bag for a replacement cup of fruit, breaking the rule about seconds.

“It is not okay with me!” the mother said. She turned back to her son, who was wailing, and yanked him back into his seat. “Sit on your butt,” she said. “What did I tell you about wasting?”

Anderson watched the mother for a few seconds and wondered if this would be one of the times when she needed to call child protective services to make a report. It had happened three times on buses already in the past two weeks, once for possible child abuse and twice for possible neglect. Stress, anger, desperation — these were behaviors she had been told to anticipate on the bus at a time when a record 10 percent of children live in homes unable to provide adequate, nutritious food. “Low-income families are being pushed to the very edge,” one of her training manuals had warned. But now Bible walked back from his driver’s seat and put his hand on the young mother’s shoulder. “It’s hot. We’re hungry. Nobody is in a good mood,” he said. “So I’d like to tell a joke. Have you heard that this bus has 2050 air conditioning? That means 20 windows down and 50 miles an hour.”

The mother appeased him with a smile. The 2-year-old went back to eating his sandwich. The meal ended, and the bus emptied out.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

“We got them through it,” Bible said.

“Thank goodness,” Anderson said.

“Fifteen minutes and 750 calories,” Bible said.

“And again tomorrow,” Anderson said.

The bus pulled away. The mother in pink slippers took her 2-year-old back to a trailer with no air conditioning. The 12-year-old boy walked away cursing about bologna. This is what the bus left behind at every stop along the route: children who were not quite satisfied, and whose appetites would build for 23 hours and 45 minutes until the bus returned.

At Cedar Grove, the first stop, all five Laughren siblings returned to their single-wide trailer, back into the vacuum of their summer. Their mother usually took the

TOP LEFT: Kids play at the home of Jennifer Laughren. Neighbor Cameron Cutshaw, 5, center, chases his sister Dezaray White, 6, and is trailed by Gabriel Jones, 5, who his Laughren’s niece. TOP RIGHT: Laughren, 32, gets home after working her second 12-hour shift in two days. She holds her 9-month-old baby, Sarah. LEFT: Courtney Laughren, 13, is hungry, but her options are limited. Most of what is in the refrigerator are bread products the family got from a local church food pantry.



Courtney gives baby sister Sarah some Mountain Dew. The caffeine and sugar often keep Sarah up at night. When the kids are in school, they get free meals, but summer becomes problematic.

family's only car to work, leaving the children stranded in the trailer park. Admission to the nearby swimming pool cost \$3 per person and they only had \$4.50 among them. The cable company had cut off their service, and they had already spent the morning watching a DVD of "Fast & Furious" twice.

"I am so freaking bored," said Courtney Laughren, 13, walking over to their refrigerator 21 hours before the school bus was scheduled to return. Inside she found leftover doughnuts, ketchup, hot sauce, milk and bread. "Desperation time," she said, reaching for a half-eaten doughnut and closing the door.

Desperation had become their permanent state, defining each of their lives in different ways. For Courtney, it meant she had stayed rail thin, with hand-me-down jeans that fell low on her hips. For Taylor, 14, it meant stockpiling calories whenever food was available, ingesting enough processed sugar and salt to bring on a doctor's lecture about obesity and early-onset diabetes, the most common risks of a food-stamp diet. For Anthony, 9, it meant moving out of the trailer and usually living at his grandparents' farm. For Hannah, 7, it meant her re-

port card had been sent home with a handwritten note of the teacher's concerns, one of which read: "Easily distracted by other people eating." For Sarah, the 9-month-old baby, it meant sometimes being fed Mountain Dew out of the can after she finished her formula, a dose of caffeine that kept her up at night.

And for Jennifer, their mother, 32, desperation time meant the most stressful part of her day began when she arrived home at 6 p.m., after another 12-hour shift as a cook at a nursing home.

"I'm back," she said now, dropping her keys onto the floor of the trailer, collapsing onto the couch.

She had spent her day preparing meals for \$8 an hour in an industrial kitchen at the nursing home: 50 servings of breaded pork chops, rolls and macaroni salad — unless, of course, residents requested something else, in which case she cooked to order. She prepared chef salads, chicken soup and sweet-potato pies until the leftovers filled the refrigerator and stacked on the counter. A few weeks earlier, a boss had spotted her taking some of those leftovers home and threatened to put her on probation. So now Jennifer had returned to the

trailer empty-handed, with five more dinners left to make for her children.

She always worried about the basics of caring for her family — “Home. Job. Food. I never hit that jackpot all at once,” she said — but only in summer did their situation become so dire that she regularly asked her children to rate their hunger on a scale of 1 to 10. When her kids were in school, they ate a total of 40 free meals and 20 snacks there each week — more than 25,000 government-sponsored calories that cost her nothing. Her \$593 in monthly food stamps usually lasted the entire month. They ate chicken casserole and ground beef for dinner. But now, with school out, she was down to \$73 in food stamps with 17 days left in the month. “Thank God for the bus,” she said, but even that solved their problems for only one meal a day.

She walked into the kitchen, collected what items remained in the pantry and set them on the table for dinner. “Buffet’s ready,” she announced. The children ate corn chips, Doritos, bread, leftover doughnuts, Airheads candy and Dr Pepper.

“I’m still hungry,” Courtney said a few minutes later, 14 hours before the bus returned.

“Me, too,” Jennifer admitted.

Her food stamps could be used for cold food but not hot food, and the nearby grocery store sold pre-made sandwiches for half-price after 8 p.m. She loaded all five kids into the car and drove a mile to the supermarket. They chose three subs from a case that glowed under fluorescent lights. They shared two, mashing pieces of bread for the baby, and then Jennifer wrapped the third sandwich to take home.

“For breakfast,” she said, and they

drove back to the trailer and went to bed.

The kids awoke at 9, two on the bed they had found at Goodwill and two more on the box spring. They watched “Fast & Furious.” They ate the leftover sandwich.

At 11 a.m., Courtney stood by the window, rocking the baby and watching for the bus. Three other children from the trailer park were already waiting outside, picking rocks off the road and throwing them at a nearby tree. They heard the bus before they saw it, big tires crunching gravel. “Food’s here!” Courtney yelled, alerting her sisters. Before they were ready to leave the trailer, Bible, the driver, walked over to find them. By now he knew the regulars on his route, and he always made sure they were fed.

Bible had lived in Greene County his entire life, but the trailer parks on his route reminded him of Belize, where he had traveled on a mission trip a decade earlier. He had spent a week there building a basic shelter for a homeless man while 70 other homeless people watched, wondering if Bible might build them houses, too. What he had experienced then was the same combination of fatigue and helplessness he felt now, looking inside the Laughrens’ dilapidated trailer. In this part of the country, in this time, no amount of sack lunches would ever be enough.

He knocked on the door. Courtney and her siblings opened it.

“We have turkey, crackers and pears today,” he said. “You hungry?”

“Always,” she said, and they followed him back to the bus.

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