

THE HOLIDAY EDITION
with Livia Berg

Livia Berg, RDN

Livia Berg, the Nutrition Education and Marketing Specialist for Norfolk Public Schools, has always lead with her heart in serving communities and fighting against hunger. As a former AmeriCorps member and No Kid Hungry Cooking Matter Coordinator, Livia has dedicated her career to caring for others through the power of food.

This season, Livia and Norfolk Public Schools is going the extra mile to feed their community during the holidays.

The NPS team recognized that the need for nutritious meals does not end over holiday breaks. No belly will be empty this winter, thanks to the full hearts of the Norfolk Public School's Nutrition Staff. Their new holiday feeding program is a way to alleviate financial stress that comes with the season and to support their city, even when school is not in session.

Read the inspiring story [here!](#)



1. Tell us about yourself

I studied dietetics at University of Delaware but didn't complete the dietetic internship right after completing my undergraduate degree. I moved to Washington DC and served as an AmeriCorps member with the Capital Area Food Bank through Share Our Strength's Cooking Matters Team. In this role I lead 6 week nutrition & culinary education courses at schools, partnering with PTA groups to reach parents. After completing my year of service I continued working in DC at the food bank and then transitioned to No Kid Hungry. While I worked on the nutrition education side of No Kid Hungry I learned a lot more about school initiatives to promote breakfast after the bell and school as nutrition hubs and new what my next step needed to be, finishing becoming a Registered Dietitian and find a job on the school level. My passion has always been working in anti-hunger organizations while making the healthy choice the easy choice. It was learning more about amazing work schools do on the ground that helped me realize exactly what I should be doing, working in a School Nutrition Department.

2. What does your position at Norfolk Public Schools look like?

In May 2018, the day after I finished my dietetic internship, I started working with Norfolk Public Schools as the Nutrition Education & Communications Specialist. What I love most about my position is that I can really make it about what I'm passionate about. I wear a lot of different hats, like all of us do, from menu planning and creating production records to running our social media channels, planning promotions, and working on innovative ways to hire new employees. I'm about to start working as our Operations Managers for Norfolk Public Schools where I'll be monitoring our large warehouse and in charge of ordering our food and supplies!

3. What are some new and exciting projects that you have been working on this year?

This school year Norfolk Public Schools has been increasing efforts to include more Farm to School through tracking how much local produce is purchased as well as new monthly entrée salads featuring Virginia's Harvest of the Month produce paired with nutrition education opportunities. Additionally, the School Nutrition Department has been embracing the fact we are a cornerstone of a diverse community through a Taste of Norfolk Public Schools campaign. Last school year we asked families to submit family recipes to feature during school lunch. Some of the recipes we've served so far are tamales, a Cuban sandwich, and chicken afritada and are looking to feature a three sisters soup in January.



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While we want to take innovative approaches to our menu to include more promotions and education opportunities for students we've faced a challenge of having enough staff at schools to implement these strategies. Personally, I find it hard to ask our school teams to go above and beyond when they barely have enough staff to cook and serve meals and are having to close lines to make it through the serving period. Norfolk Public Schools started the school year 25% under-staffed including vacancies in two School Nutrition Managers, District Supervisor, and Operations Manager positions. This school year we took a harder look at our challenges of hiring and retaining employees. So far we've successfully removed barriers to the hiring process which includes no more fees for fingerprinting, completing the TB test, and taking the Food Handler's course. The turn-around time from interviewing candidates to them working in our schools has been drastically decreased. We've also worked to remove the GED/High School Diploma requirement for part-time positions and initiated a pay proposal and succeeded in getting salary increases for Cafeteria Monitors and Part-Time School Nutrition Assistants.

To expand this work we've looked at how we are hiring new employees through hosting School Nutrition specific job fairs, collaborating with Norfolk Public School's Transition & Career Development Program, and dual employment opportunities. Currently we have five schools that have staff working as a Part-Time School Nutrition Assistant for School Breakfast and transitions to a Cafeteria Monitor for lunch. Our biggest success has been exploring dual employment with our Transportation Department. So far we've hired approximately 20 Bus Drivers and Bus Assistants to work part-time as either Cafeteria Monitors or School Nutrition Assistants. From these efforts in just three months, we were able to cut the number of vacancies in nearly half.



To help retain School Nutrition employees we've started a few new initiatives including exploring how to better pair free GED programs for our part-time staff, purchased District-Wide School Nutrition Association membership for School Nutrition Managers, and an employee-referral program. By focusing on our staff and supporting their growth we believe we can improve how our employees feel about working for School Nutrition.

4. How does Norfolk go above and beyond to give back to their community?

Our local chapter for the School Nutrition Association hosts an annual food drive to benefit School Nutrition employees whom are in need over the holidays. We assemble the boxes (see sample box) so that each recipient gets a box filled with items to make a holiday meal, including turkey and fresh vegetables. Our district promotes the food drive, assembles the food boxes, and distributes them to selected employees. Last school year we accidentally purchased double the amount of turkeys and were able to surprise our staff that work in our warehouse each with a turkey. The look on their faces lit up so much last year that we decided to continue the tradition this school year. I as well as other administrators pull our money together to buy these additional turkeys.

Year round, we partner with our local food bank to help distribute backpacks as part of their weekend backpack partner.

5. How much food was donated last year?

Last year we received **810 pounds** of donated food including fresh produce and turkeys through the SNA sponsored Food Drive.



6. Tell us about what inspired the holiday break feeding initiative, what it will look like, logistical challenges, and what you see as the future of holiday break feeding programs.

Our School Nutrition Director falls asleep and wakes up thinking about how we can reach and feed more kids. She has seen that other schools have fed kids over winter and spring breaks and wanted to see how we can start feeding kids at every chance when school is out. For our first time serving lunch over Winter Break we decided to lean on our existing partnerships with recreation centers that work with us to serve summer meals. Our staff selected two recreation centers to start that are located in the areas with the greatest need.

Some challenges that we are anticipating are that we just don't know how big or small the programs may be in terms of providing enough or preventing waste. We want to provide a variety of options so students aren't eating the same menu item each day but want to be mindful on menu items that once thawed cannot be re-frozen and how much fresh vegetables to order. Currently, we do not have a shelf-stable vegetable option that we could use but would look into purchasing hummus for this in the future. Other issues we foresee are handling allergies. Since we don't know who will show up the first day, we'll have to act fast to provide and identify appropriate students for children with special dietary needs. This can be especially challenging with the limited staff that is currently scheduled to work.

Our future goal is to expand this program to more sites in the future, starting with Spring Break. We'd also like to explore the possibility of providing two meals a day and serving warm meals as part of this initiative. Further, we'd like to explore how to provide meals when schools are closed due to inclement weather outside of operating emergency shelters.

