

AUSD Food and Nutrition Services Surprises Families with “Cookies and Milk”

After Alameda Unified School District (AUSD) suspended in-class instruction on March 13, James Assia, the district’s director of Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), found himself in a difficult situation. The district had more than 4000 cartons of milk in its refrigerators — milk that was ordered for student breakfasts and lunches before fears about COVID-19 forced schools across the country to cease in-person operations. But while AUSD was ready to provide free meals to Alameda youth, Assia knew that his supply of milk was far greater than what the demand would be.



FNS Director James Assia packs a bag with several days' worth of food in the Wood Middle School kitchen.

At the same time, Chandra Benitez, a food services assistant who normally works at Ruby Bridges Elementary School and the ACLC and Nea charter schools, was aware of another surplus. Concerns about the coronavirus had seriously curtailed sales of Girl Scout cookies in northern California this spring, and the Alameda City Service Unit wanted to donate cookies to various food programs, including AUSD’s free meal service.

Crystal Creamery, which supplies milk to AUSD, had already told Assia that it was going to donate the milk rather than charge for it. And after Benitez told Assia about the cookies, he realized the combination of donations could be a classic hit.

“We first thought of offering a ‘Cookies and Milk’ event to families,” Assia says. “But then we realized that could draw a crowd of people to one place, which would violate social distancing guidelines. So we decided to instead put a box of Girl Scout cookies and four cartons of milk in each bag - as a surprise.”

Last Friday, as families drove and walked up to the food distribution sites, children’s eyes lit up, and some children started clapping when they realized they were getting a whole box of cookies. “This is *awesome*,” one mother said as she peeked in the bag. “I wasn’t expecting this!”



FNS staff were as excited as the children about adding boxes of cookies to Friday's bags.



FNS employee Chandra Benitez helped coordinate a Girl Scout cookie donation to AUSD for local families.

“Girls Scouts and food service are my two biggest passions,” Benitez says. “To bring them together is amazing. Especially at this time, it feels so good to be able to help take care of this community by handing out meals and providing children with some sense of normalcy.”

All youth in Alameda aged 18 and younger can pick up free meals from 11 am to 1 pm at Earhart Elementary School, Wood Middle School, and the Alameda Point Collaborative. Children do not need to be AUSD students and do not need to show ID. Meals are served on Tuesdays and Fridays.

“I am so grateful for our AUSD Food Service team,” Assia says. “We all have the same goal in mind, which is to feed as many children as possible during this very difficult time. I also want to thank northern California Girl Scouts and Crystal Creamery for their generous donations. Seeing everyone’s excitement when receiving their cookies and milk was uplifting. It is exactly what our community needs right now.”

FNS is donating other surplus food – such as yogurt, bags of carrots, apples, lettuce, and celery - to the Alameda Food Bank and Meals on Wheels.

“Since the earliest stages of this emergency situation, our food service workers have not hesitated to ensure that hundreds of meals were served to those in need across Alameda, and that work is continuing,” says Superintendent Pasquale Scuderi. “Their selflessness and continuing commitment to this community should be widely recognized and celebrated.”