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CASE STUDY

New Taipei City | Eat with Love

Free Meal Society

One measure of a society's inclusivity is how it cares for its most vulnerable members. New Taipei City's Eat with Love programme addresses food insecurity among children and teens at risk in the city of four million—and is completely funded by private donations.

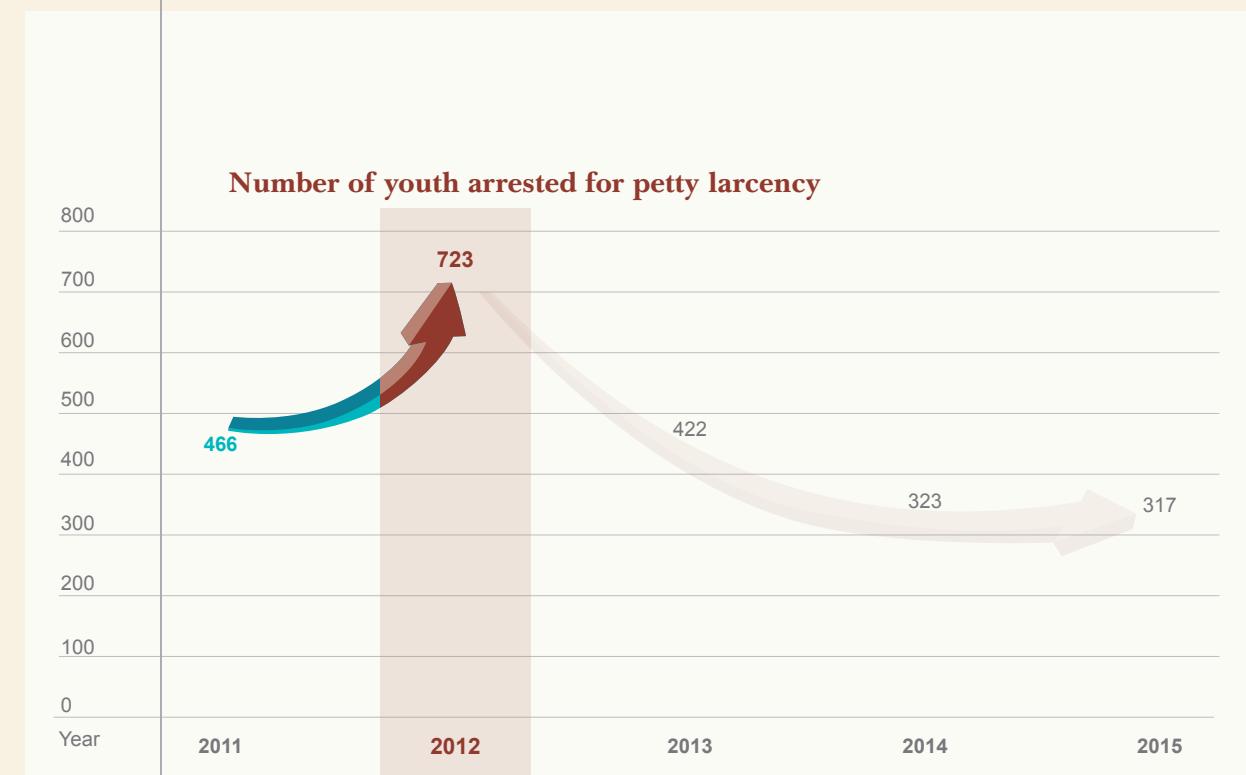
The challenge

In 2012, a 13-year-old child in New Taipei City was prosecuted for stealing a box of salad. The well-publicised episode highlighted the city's systemic inability to spot and help children and teens at risk.

Household disruptions can cause children to go hungry; to feed themselves, some resort to petty crime, which could result in juvenile records. In one case, two siblings were left to fend for themselves when their grandmother and main care-giver was suddenly warded in hospital. Their

single-parent father was unable to care for them due to work commitments. In another case, the father of a schoolchild lost his business but was unwilling to seek financial help, and became unable to provide food for his family.

Even though welfare systems are in place to address vulnerable households, they do not readily cater to sudden, short term or unreported vulnerabilities in cases such as these.



“Eat with Love is aligned with New Taipei City’s social welfare principles of ‘rescuing when at risk, not when poor’.”

The Solution

Due to public outcry over how the 13-year-old child was treated, City Councillor Chen Mingyi challenged the city government to find better ways to address hunger in high risk households, and prevent children from having to resort to crime for food.

In December 2012, the City Council launched the Eat with Love programme as a pilot. Four partnering convenience chain stores – 7-eleven, Family Mart, Hi-Life, and OK – were designated “Guardian Stations” (Xìngfú bǎowèi zhàn). Initially funded by the government, these stations offer meals to all under 18-year-olds, capped at NT\$80 (\$3.60) per meal. The city worked closely with school principals to persuade nearby convenient stores to participate, and ran campaigns to raise awareness of the programme.

Convenience stores were chosen as they serve fresh meals and snacks, are open 24/7, and are accessibly located on nearly every major street corner. Bright and airy, they lack the stigma of welfare services –

unlike government facilities, schools or police stations. Since the stores are open all year round, children in need can get support even during school holidays or winter months.

The programme means that vulnerable children and teens can get three meals a day without disrupting their health or education. Children and teens are registered when they come in for the first time. They are then provided with meal coupons and their details are forwarded to the Service Centre for High Risk Families. The Centre follows up within 24 hours, through school counsellors or social workers, and additional assistance is provided if needed.

Eat with Love is aligned with New Taipei’s social welfare principles of “rescuing when at risk, not when poor” (Jiūjí bù jiù qióng). Vulnerabilities are addressed at the point of emergency, before they spiral and become entrenched in long term welfare dependency, which is disempowering. At heart, such policies aim to create a more just, resilient and caring community.



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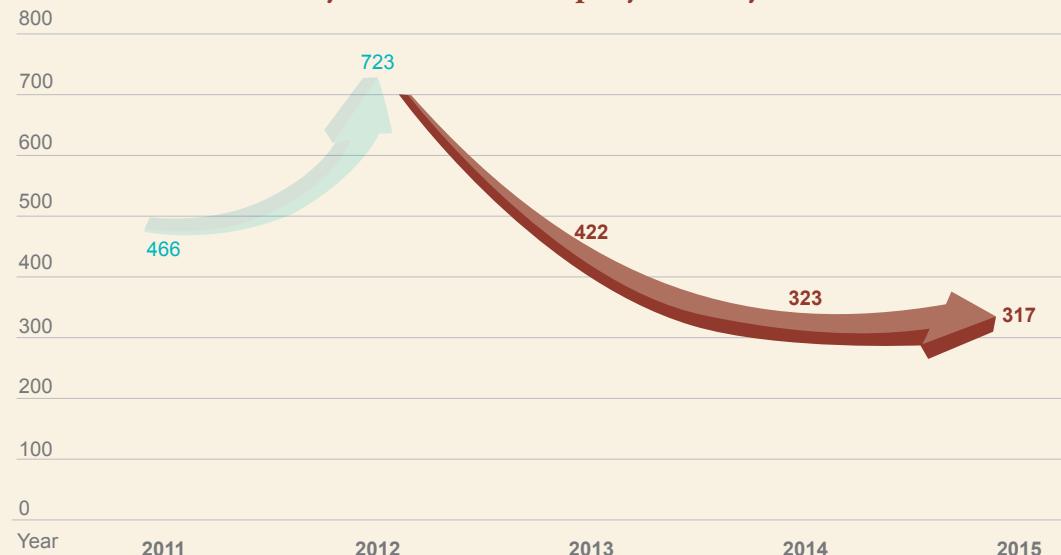
01 All youth under 18 can approach any convenience store that carries the “Guardian Station” sticker, and ask for a meal.

02 Children and youth who come in for a meal are requested to register so that social services can follow up with them.

“Once the public became aware of the programme, they began to donate actively ... The funds raised have more than covered the NT\$2,942,863 spent.”



Number of youth arrested for petty larceny



The outcome

When Eat with Love was first introduced, the public was sceptical: many believed the system would be exploited for free meals. Labelled “crazy” by the media, New Taipei’s Mayor, Eric Chu, argued: “I know we are a mature society. We are a well-educated society. Our students will know it’s only for the students [in] need.”

Indeed, since the formal launch of the programme in January 2013, some 2,000 convenience stores have dispatched meal sets to only 23,422 children (both one-off and repeat cases). In 2017 alone, 1,691 children and youth benefited from the programme. Over the years, 2,028 new cases of “high risk” families have been identified and provided with assistance.

The programme has also harnessed public goodwill. Once the public became aware of the programme, they began to donate actively to it through the city government’s charity account. The funds

raised have more than covered the NT\$2,942,863 (\$131,325) spent since the programme’s inception. This unusual collaboration with four large food chain businesses also represents a new approach to public-private partnership towards social goals. Mayor Chu shared: “After this [programme] was accomplished, the leader of the convenience store [came] to my office. I gave them a prize and said ‘thank you’, and everybody was happy. We should pay [them] back, not with money, but [with] respect.”

Locally, the programme has won the “Health and Equity” award from Taiwan’s Ministry of Health and Welfare, and the Outstanding Government Public Relations award. The programme is also being expanded to include more convenience stores in New Taipei. A similar programme of “Safeguarding Stations” was adopted in Taichung City in 2016, with approximately 1,220 convenience store outlets. ◎

01 Extensive publicity campaigns for the Guardian Station programme meant that more youth and children knew where to go, if caught in difficult circumstances.

02 The number of youth arrested for petty larceny, which includes stealing of food, has fallen rapidly since the induction of the programme.