

BUCKS COUNTY  
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# Summer camp remains out of reach for some Bucks, Montgomery County families

By Marion Callahan, staff writer



For some area families, summer conjures up thoughts of Jersey Shore vacations, activity-filled day camps and a time to see children stretch their wings in drama, science or computers.

But for others, summer paints a different picture.

For Janemarie Kirkwood, of Chalfont, it's a logistical nightmare, rife with pangs of guilt and wishes for opportunities that are financially out of reach for her four school-age children, who range in age from 5 to 12. The traditional full-day, five-day camp at her local YMCA would cost her \$314 per child for just one week. The science and technology camp her 7-year-old son would like to attend also costs more than \$300 for the week.

"It makes me sad that my kids miss out on some of these cool camps because I can't afford it," said Kirkwood. "When they return to school in the fall, I don't want them to look back and feel disappointed."

Summer can be a financial hardship and a headache for scheduling. While some camps offer financial assistance to families who fall at or below the poverty line, many programs are unaffordable luxuries for families who fall into the middle-to-low income range, said Donna Cooper, executive director of [Public Citizens for Children and Youth](#), a Philadelphia-based child advocacy group. And the widening income gap in the region is made more pronounced in the summer months, as the need for affordable full-day programs far outstrips the demand, she said.

With day camps across the country costing an average of \$313 a week, and sleep-away camp \$768 a week, filling summer days for children can be a growing challenge for many families, according the American Camp Association. In fact, the trade group says, 70 percent of the campers in its network come from middle- and upper-income households.

In Bucks and Montgomery counties, camps range from \$50 a week for a municipal program to more than \$1,000 a week for a private specialty camp.

Breezy Point in Northampton, for example, offers a full-day, eight-week camp for \$3,390 — or \$423 a week. At Diamond Ridge Day Camp in Warwick, full-day camp for eight weeks is \$5,020, which includes lunch, snacks and door-to-door transportation. At Future Stars Day Camp at Delaware Valley University, full-day camp costs \$365 a week. At Penn State Abington Summer Camps, a full-day, week-long digital media program is \$335. Scholarships are not available for any of those programs.

Those who don't have the money to pay for such programs also worry their kids will fall behind in school. This is more commonly referred to as "[learning loss](#)," Cooper said. That's a concern shared by the [National Summer Learning Association](#), a national children's advocacy organization that promotes education and enrichment opportunities in the summer so students don't fall behind when they return back to school in September.

To address the affordability and learning loss dilemma, the camp at Foxwood Manor Apartments Community Center in Middletown is raising money through private organizations to help between eight and 10 low-income children attend the camp, which offers activities and academic programs. The six-week program costs \$125. The program, called Brighten Up, maintains that 90 percent of the 25 kids participating in past camps measured "no significant learning loss."

Kristin Chapin, associate director of the YWCA Bucks County, said she's aware of the economic and academic challenges facing families who struggle to find a place for their children over the summer.

The YWCA and the YMCA offer programs that charge on a sliding scale, based on income. Chapin said most of the programs are in Lower Bucks County because of economic need.

She sees need growing countywide, though.

"The gap is growing between the rich and the poor in our county and we are seeing new families facing economic challenges," said Chapin, who said the camps can cost as little as \$8

a week for some low-income families. "The demand for the summer camps is increasing and we often have waiting lists."

At the Lower Bucks Family YMCA branches in Morrisville, Fairless Hills and Newtown Township, at least 70 percent of the 500 campers get some kind of subsidy, and discounts are offered for multiple family members. At the Central Bucks Family YMCA, 361 campers — between 35 percent and 50 percent of all campers — receive assistance. Full price of full-day camp is \$314 a week, according to YMCA officials from Lower and Central Bucks branches.

Carlie Bearn, child care and camp director at the Upper Bucks YMCA, said summer programs offer financial aid on a sliding income scale to about 30 percent of its camp's 150 participants. Full price for camp is \$188 a week for members or \$244 for nonmembers.

"It's a struggle for most families that come in to afford that, especially if they have multiple children looking for care," said Bearn. "Many say that otherwise, they might have to keep kids at home, and it's not the safest environment sometimes."

Tammy Schoonover, director of community services for the Bucks County Opportunity Council, an antipoverty nonprofit, said some families are forced to make decisions just to survive through the summer.

"That often includes sacrifices for older children," she said. "Participating in sports and camps is not an option for them. Many need to babysit, and further, it isolates children and families who can't afford summer activities.

"You have many families working to try to figure out how to feed their kids in addition to how to get them watched, so we see an increase in food pantry visits," she added. "The experience of summer is very different for those living paycheck to paycheck."

Some area churches and municipalities offer camps that are meant to be affordable.

Quakertown — where schools report nearly 30 percent of students below poverty — sponsors a full-day summer recreational camp for children ages 7 to 12 from June through August, charging borough residents \$50 per child per week (\$100 for nonresidents) for the program.

"This is the first time we've had to charge, but you still can't get a babysitter for that amount," said Ryan Sevenski, Quakertown parks and recreation coordinator. "It was hard to make the change (to charge), but there is nothing full day in the area that's even comparable."

Christina Harmonosky, of Richland, called the Quakertown program "a godsend" for her daughter Caroline, who has been attending the camp since she was 6 years old.

"When we first moved to the area, we couldn't afford to send her anywhere else," Harmonosky said.

To give back, Caroline, now 11, donated \$300 she collected from selling homemade slime to help buy balls and other equipment for the camp. "This camp means a lot for her, and it gave her something fun and constructive to do. It has just been great," Harmonosky said.

Sevenski said last year the program served 300 children. This year, 150 are enrolled.

Like Quakertown, the Bensalem parks and recreation camp program doesn't offer scholarships because the fees are just enough to cover camp costs, officials said. The township's program is \$300 for part-time camp and \$475 for full day for the entire six weeks.

Sabrina Stancil, assistant director for Bensalem parks and recreation, said the township works to keep prices low for residents and offers a payment plan so parents can start putting money into it as early as January. The full-day camp is full, but part-time camps still are open for registration, she said.

"There is really a demand for having something for children to do while parents are working," said Stancil, adding that nearly 1,000 kids are enrolled in the Bensalem program. "This

alleviates that pressure question that two-parent families have come summer: 'What can we do with our kids?'"

Kirkwood said she's thinking about changing her work schedule so she can spend more time with her children this summer. While she wishes there were scholarship programs for middle-income people, too, she said her kids are not complaining.

Her 12-year-old son, Troy, understands why he can't go to art camp.

"I understand need, like going to the doctor's," Troy said. "Camp is just a thing I want to do — not something I need."