West Hartford Public Libraries – Feeding the Community in West Hartford, Connecticut

by Carol Waxman, Children's Service Librarian, West Hartford Public Library

The West Hartford Public Libraries in West Hartford, Connecticut have partnered with local agencies to support the effort of providing assistance to families with food insecurities in our community.

The Faxon Branch Library met State of Connecticut criteria for serving free lunches during the summer because it is located in a West Hartford neighborhood whose schools meet or exceed a defined percentage of their student populations receiving free or reduced lunches.

During that first summer, lunch was served in a program room at the library starting at 1:00 PM (when the building opened) for 31 summer weekdays. Lunches were prepared by West Hartford Public Schools Nutritional Services at a local school kitchen and served by their staff. A total of 368 lunches were served or an average of 11-12 lunches per day, a disappointing number given the potential of the neighborhood demographic. Upon review of the program, the library staff decided to make changes in the 2018 program. We began to serve lunch at noon instead of 1:00 PM and modified the hours of the library branch to open an hour earlier. We saw a dramatic increase in the number of lunches served in 2018 with a total of 1263 lunches, a solid increase of 895! It is important to note that there was a summer library program taking place in the summer of 2018 and many of those children did remain for lunch, adding to the substantial increase. We have already made the decision to serve lunch at 12 noon for summer 2019.

Aside from the free lunches served during the summer months, the West Hartford Libraries serve as a conduit for a food backpack program facilitated by a local church. Volunteers pack the food delivered to them by Connecticut Foodshare into backpacks and deliver these to two library buildings. Families eligible for free lunch during the school year in their school buildings are also eligible for a weekend backpack of food to take home during the summer when schools are closed. Families come to the library buildings on Friday or Saturday to pick up the backpack. This program was moderately successful. Not all backpacks were picked up. A decision was made to not offer perishable fruits and vegetables so that the backpacks could be used the following week, if not retrieved. Increased publicity about this program to those eligible will hopefully increase participation in summer 2019.

In addition to the summer backpack program, a new program in fall 2018 allows families with middle and high school students the opportunity to pick up weekend food backpacks at two of our libraries on Fridays and Saturdays all year instead of going to their school offices. This was done to avoid the stigma of older children and teens having to visit the school office to pick up their backpacks and having other students ask what they are doing. The library is a neutral and discreet location for distribution and is convenient for families. The backpacks are plain navy in color, without anything written on the outside. The program began in September 2018 and is growing rapidly with ten families participating at one library site and five at another.

Connecticut's Foodshare and other agencies involved in collecting and distributing food have an abundance of product. The challenge is to deliver the food to those who need it. With this in mind, one additional project has been initiated. Packets of non-perishable food (in zip lock bags) are ready and waiting after storytime programs at one of our library sites. The bags are stored in a box and anyone is free to take one. Families are very appreciative of this "storytime perk". This happens at the same library location where we serve free summer lunch.

The West Hartford Public Libraries are helping to meet the challenge of helping our community with food insecurity. We believe that any community can do part or all of what we do. Let's make it happen for everyone who needs this.