

Summer Meals at Palmer Library

By Stephanie Maher, Director, Palmer Public Library

About seven or eight years ago, I picked up a copy of *School Library Journal* and read about California's amazing public library summer lunch program. I immediately knew I wanted to start a program like that at the Palmer Library. For years, kids and teens would spend all day in the library during the summer eating junk food or nothing at all. Moreover, I knew from talking with the parents and grandparents in our community that they could use some help during the summer months. Unfortunately, we were short-staffed, I had just taken over as head of the Youth Services Department, and our Young Adult librarian had just left. I kept the idea in the back of my mind, waiting until the time was right.

A few years later, with the Youth Services Staff positions filled, I reached out to someone at the Massachusetts Department of Childhood Services to find out how to start a summer lunch program. They quickly put me in contact with Project Bread and CNOP (Childhood Nutrition Outreach Program). They helped me team-up with the wonderful Food Services Staff of the school system in the next town over in Monson. They were running a summer lunch site through the extension of the Free and Reduced Lunch Program through the USDA at their elementary school and without hesitation agreed to make food for us too.

Our first summer, we served lunch twice a week for six weeks, and we were averaging about 30-40 meals a day. It quickly became evident that we needed to expand, and for the past three years, we have been running the lunch program from Monday-Thursday. The feedback has been nothing but positive, and families, kids, teens, and caregivers are grateful. The biggest surprise was how easy it was on our end. The Food Services team in Monson puts it all together for us, we transport it and hand it out! Word got out quickly about the program, thanks to a billboard put up by Project Bread in the center of town. We got calls from local churches and service organizations asking how they could help. With a combination of staff and volunteers, we have handed out over 2,450 meals to kids and teens in our area! A year ago I was hired as director, and it is my mission to continue this program, grow it, and to find new ways to bring materials, programs, food, and fun to our community!