

Summer Meals at the Hemet Public Library

by Jennifer McNeal, Hemet Public Library, Hemet CA

The Hemet Public Library is a single branch, city-funded library of 86,000, located in Hemet, California. Our local school district reports that 80% of students are on the free and reduced meal plan at school. Library staff posed the question, "If our goal is to prevent summer slide and keep children reading, how can children concentrate on learning when they are hungry?" With so many children facing food insecurity, the library decided to take action to help ensure that children continue to get meals during the summer school break. In 2015, the library approached the local school district to see if we could serve as a summer meals site for the USDA's Summer Food Service Program, and a partnership was formed.



For the past 5 summers, lunch has been served at the Hemet Public Library on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays (the week days that the library is open). The library is fortunate to have an indoor, multi-purpose room where lunch can be served. The school district prepares the meals at their facility and transports them to the library every morning. School district staff serves the food to the children between 11:30 am – 12:30 pm. The library provides refrigerators, storage space for dry foods, as well as tables, chairs, and staff time to cover clean-up after each meal. The school district handles all of the paper work relating to the USDA program. During the 2019 summer, 1,849 meals were served at the Hemet Public Library over 19 days.

After serving as a lunch site for several years now, my advice to those looking to start a program at their library is to start early! Working out the logistics with your partners, whether that is the local school district or another community food organization, takes a great deal of time. There are insurance issues, contract logistics, local government approval, etc., that will pop up during the process.

Summer lunch at the library has become a central part of the Hemet Public Library's annual summer reading program. Over the past several summers, library staff noticed a decline in event attendance if the event was more than an hour before or after lunch was served. Consequently, summer reading events now revolve around lunch time, with many activities happening during lunch. The library has many community partners, such as local authors, museum staff, Boy and Girl Scout troops, and the County Public Health Department, who provided free lunch-time activities. Having community partners greatly reduced the strain on

library staff to provide summer entertainment. The Friends of the Hemet Public Library and the Hemet Public Library Foundation provided financial support for the library to hire professional entertainers to provide library patrons with fun, unique, and educational activities. Altogether, the Hemet Public Library was able to provide an activity practically every day for lunch attendees. On days when there was going to be a big performance following lunch, such as a magician, the number of lunch attendees doubled. The school district was provided with a copy of the library's summer events schedule so that they could plan accordingly.



As part of the summer lunch at the library, the library has an optional survey for lunch attendees to complete. One of the questions included is "Where else do you get lunch?" While most of the responders said they get lunch at home, a few said that they did not get lunch anywhere else besides the library. To know that because our library is a summer meals site, a child did not have to go hungry that day, makes all of the work surrounding the process worth it.