

Partnership promotes early literacy in public housing communities

By Kim Doleatto

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SARASOTA — The Sarasota Housing Authority, in partnership with Sarasota County Libraries, wrapped up an effort to get books to kids who need them most.

With the launch of the Book Rich Environment campaign in June, the two organizations distributed 2,500 free books over the summer to children who live in the public housing communities on Orange Avenue, where the bulk of resident families live.

Many live below the poverty line and, as a result, stocking the home with age appropriate books may lose precedence over other essentials.

“About 66 percent of low income households have no books in the home. How can kids read on grade-level without them?” said William Russell, CEO of Sarasota Housing Authority.

After 20 years of experience providing affordable housing and helping parents reach crucial milestones like earning a GED or a professional certification, he said it was a moral imperative to reach the kids, too. When he spoke with a volunteer prekindergarten teacher at the housing authority’s on-campus learning center, Russell learned that many of the the 4-year-olds didn’t know the alphabet, their numbers or recognize their written name.

“We seem to have relatively few kids graduating high school or pursuing college,” Russell said. “If we’re going to break the cycle of generational poverty, they can’t be starting off school already behind their peers. We need to intervene.” The Book Rich Environment events on June 9, July 13 and Aug. 9 included inviting families to register for library cards, sign up for summer reading programs, receive free books and take free family portraits. The final event last Wednesday included backpacks full of school supplies. The campaign served about 150 kids.

Although they’ve partnered in the past, this was the first year Sarasota County Libraries took part in the Book Rich Environment campaign. “Getting families into the library is part of our mission, but we also want to give parents the tools they need as their child’s first reading coach and teacher.

The technical aspect of reading is important, but nurturing the love of it is what we really want,” said Sarabeth Kalajian, director of Sarasota County Libraries. “The excitement the kids have when they get to pick out books and take them home is a good start,” she added. It’s all part of a national move toward incorporating early literacy into assisted housing programs.

Nearly 4 million low-income children live in HUD-assisted housing across the country and around 35 housing authorities participated – only around one percent, “but it’s gaining steam,” Russell said. The Sarasota Housing Authority summer book giveaways will continue to be part of their early learning programming. “These kids have every ability to learn but they need the chance,” he said.

To volunteer with the Sarasota Housing Authority’s after school tutoring program, please call 941-361-6210.



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Z'myiaha Williams, 5, starts kindergarten on Monday at Alta Vista Elementary School.



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Sarasota's Housing Authority in partnership with the Sarasota County Libraries, wrapped up it's last event of the summer just before school starts in Sarasota County. Over a 150 children attended the event. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / THOMAS BENDER]