

Sarasota Housing Authority gives hundreds of books to low-income children

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The Sarasota Housing Authority hosted its annual Books and Badges literacy event on Wednesday to distribute hundreds of free books to low-income children living in public housing.

Hosted in partnership with the Sarasota Police Department, the Book Rich Environment Collaborative and Sarasota County Libraries, the event aims to prevent summer learning loss and to improve relationships between the police department and families in the area.

Officer Nate Lynn attended the event for the first time, but the police department has partnered with the housing authority since the event started eight years ago.

"It's a great opportunity for us to come together as officers with the community that we serve and interact with the kids before they go back to school," Lynn said. "We're trying to give them a positive experience with law enforcement."

Sarasota Housing Authority President and CEO William Russell has worked for the organization for 17 years. He said that the low-income housing area they serve is considered a book desert. They distribute books three times a year so that every family home can accumulate 10 or 12 books.

The housing authority started the event to improve children's literacy rates and get them to read on grade level by third grade. He hopes the program will help kids graduate high school and pursue other opportunities that they might not otherwise have, like a technical trade or college.



First grader Karina Simmons, 6, left, and her sister kindergartener Derriah Keno, 5, show their mom the new books they received Wednesday from the Badges and Books event. *Mike Lang, Sarasota Herald-Tribune*



Kids from the Boys and Girls Club of Sarasota line up for free books and a Chick-fil-A sandwich during a Badges and Books event on Wednesday. *Mike Lang, Sarasota Herald-Tribune*

"I'm convinced the way to break this generational cycle is through education. Without that, their options really start to narrow," Russell said.

Sarasota Vice Mayor Kyle Battie attended the event and helped distribute books. He said that he hopes the books will help the kids grow compassion and understanding for other people while increasing their own confidence.

"One of the main things that I try to stress to them, particularly when you're dealing with children, is that they matter," Battie said. "Their voices matter."

Residents in the area said that the lack of resources for children in Newtown has been a growing issue.

Marie Robinson, 49, has lived in the area for the last 35 years and was able to get a bag of books for her 4-year-old granddaughter.

Robinson said that she wants to see the city and the community come together for the kids and implement more programs for them.

"The kids are the future for today, tomorrow, and the years to come," Robinson said. "The children need a sense of community. Without a community, there's nothing; you have nothing. If everyone came together for these kids, no kid would go to bed hungry."