

Lunch at the Library: Fresno County Public Library

Fast Facts

Year One —2013

Provider: Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission
Branch: Fresno Central branch
Lunch service: 8 weeks, meals served 5 days a week
Volunteers: 3 paid interns and 12 volunteers
Meals served: 1,718

Year Two —2014

Branches: Fresno Central, Fowler, Carruthers, and Sanger
Lunch service: 8 weeks, meals served 5 days a week
Volunteers: 4 paid interns, 12 volunteers (2-4 volunteers per site)
Meals served: 3,071

Program Highlights

MyPlate nutrition education classes provided by University of California Cooperative Extension, visit from Fresno Grizzlies baseball team mascot, daily craft activities, special visits from Summer Reading Program performers and free book giveaways.

Partners

Fresno County Public Library
Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission

www.fresnolibrary.org
www.fresnoeoc.org

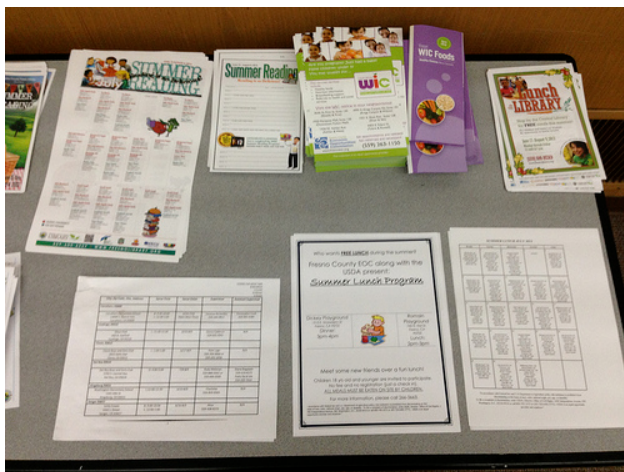
Assets:

This effort established a new relationship the Fresno County Library Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission (Fresno EOC). Fresno EOC provides a range of services across the county and can provide additional visibility for the library. Because Fresno EOC provides services throughout the county (e.g., WIC, Meals on Wheels, Head Start meals), it has the transportation and infrastructure to help reach rural areas and areas in need of services.

In addition, Fresno EOC aims to provide lunch service for as long as is feasible to minimize the gap between summer and the commencement of school. Because participation often declines in August, many summer meal providers may elect to end the program well before the conclusion of summer.

In Year One, the library hosted the lunch program in its Central Branch, located in downtown Fresno and was very successful. In Year Two, the program expanded to three additional branches in smaller communities.





staff.

Volunteers were key to the success of the program. In Years One and Two, volunteers assisted in the program operations. In Year One, interns from the local Boys & Girls Club also assisted with the program, funded through Pacific Gas & Electric. Another intern was provided through Fresno State University with the support of a grant. In Year Two, there were four paid interns, provided by the local Boys & Girls Club. Financial support provided by Fresno EOC also employed a library aide to oversee day-to-day operations of lunch service at the Central Library. This made the process go more smoothly and lessened the burden on library

“Having a reliable staff member from Fresno EOC [at the Central Branch] for just a few hours made a critical difference.”

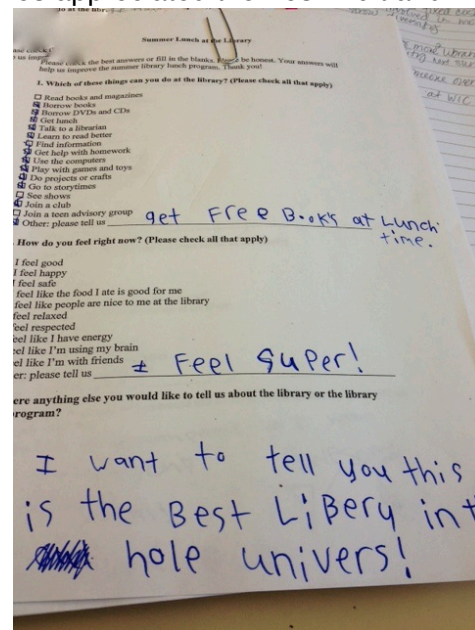
The library also leveraged its community partnerships to support programming and draw families to the program. The University of California Cooperative Extension offered MyPlate nutrition education classes, and a grant from Dollar General enabled the library to give away free books. Library staff reported higher participation on book give-away days. A visit from the mascot of the Fresno Grizzlies, a popular minor league baseball team, also helped draw kids to the lunch program.

The lunchroom also offered an information table to highlight library services such as family literacy classes and other community resources. Because families were staying in the lunchroom for a period of time, they were more likely to browse these resources and learn more about other programs at the library.

In surveys completed by children and parents/caregivers, families appreciated the fresh fruit and healthy options provided by the lunch as well as the safety, programming, and books provided by the library. One mother reported that she made the program at the Central Branch a part of her daily summer routine with her child, which included a daily bike ride to the library. Surveys unanimously reflected gratitude among community members—especially among the children—for the library’s willingness to offer this service.

Challenges:

At the Central branch, the lunch service occurred during a time when staff typically took their lunch break, therefore staffing was limited. A smaller challenge was making sure that parents sufficiently understood the rule about not eating the meals. It is a natural inclination for parents/caregivers to want to take a bite off a child’s plate— particularly if it would otherwise go to waste—or in cases where the adults may be



experiencing hunger too. Program rules prevent adults from eating any part of the child's meal. Limited literacy skills may affect some parents' understanding of rules in writing—even if written the family's native language. Clear communication about the rules is critical to the program's success.

In Year Two, participation varied in the additional branches: One branch was extraordinarily successful while another garnered modest participation. Branch staff indicated that more outreach would likely have increased participation in lower participation branches. In these cases, there were other summer meal sites in the community, which could have impacted participation. For libraries in communities where there are other—and sometimes more established—sites, it can be helpful to coordinate communication efforts with other sites, explore opportunities to mutually support one another, and set reasonable expectations about participation at your library.

Tips from Fresno County staff:

- ⇒ Make sure that program rules are translated into families' primary language, taking into account potential issues of limited literacy.
- ⇒ Be sure to find multiple methods to communicate the “short list” of program rules.
- ⇒ Table toppers with basic program rules alleviate some of the burden on library staff of continually reminding families about the rules.
- ⇒ Be mindful of lunch hour staffing constraints. Maximize use of your volunteers!
- ⇒ Consider opportunities to find volunteers and interns through community partners, youth service agencies, and local universities.
- ⇒ Find out if your meal sponsor can provide an employee to staff the lunch service (or find a creative solution to support one of your employees).
- ⇒ Consider the length of the summer meal service program. If your provider can operate the meal service until close to the start of school, what type of outreach efforts can the library pursue to help sustain participation?
- ⇒ Early August may be a good time to start bridging the meal service with library Back-to-School readiness programming. If the lunch service ends many weeks before school starts, be sure to have signs for families letting them know about the change. It is a good idea to offer information about other resources to find food (other summer meal sites still in operation, National Hunger Hotline).