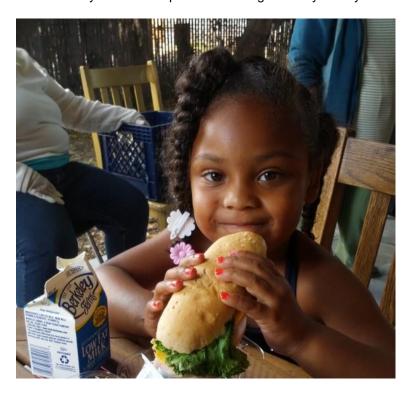# Oakland Public Library Again Serving Free Summer Lunches

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After working at the Oakland Public Library for more than 15 years, branch manager Pete Villaseñor has grown accustomed to kids hanging out in the library all summer long. For some, the library serves serve as ad hoc day care while their parents are at work. For others, the library is a safe place to escape the streets. Many kids show up in the morning and stay all day—but few have food or money to buy a meal.

Eating summer lunch at the Elmhurst Branch of the Oakland Public Library. (Photo: Sharon McKellar)

"During the summer, kids used to ask me for money," Villaseñor said. "They wanted to go buy a burrito or tacos. Sometimes they'd ask me for food."

Then, in summer 2011, OPL partnered with the City of Oakland and the Alameda County Food Bank to provide meals for children in the library through one of the USDA's summer nutrition programs.

"It sounded revolutionary, but I knew it was probably something we could do," said Nina Lindsay, supervising librarian for OPL children's services. "We've always been in the business of trying to find information to help people, but more and more we're trying to connect them with the end product of what

they need. Rather than coming in the library to find out where they can get food, we can give people free food in the library and it makes it much more seamless."

That first summer, the program started on a trial basis at four branches in the library system. Food bank volunteers served food to children, and librarians read to kids as they ate. The libraries began to shift their program schedule to offer activities to kids after lunch—while their bellies were full so they could concentrate.The endeavor was so successful that OPL expanded the program to 11 branches in 2012, serving more than 7,500 meals to children throughout the summer. "Since then, I haven't been asked for lunch money," said Villaseñor.

This year the program will expand even further—as a pilot project to bring lunch and literacy activities to eight additional library branches across the state. The project, "Summer Lunch at the Library," is a collaboration between the California Summer Meal Coalition (CSMS) and the California Library Association (CLA), working with the Fresno County Public Library, Los Angeles Public Library, Sacramento Public Library and San Diego County Public Library. OPL staff are acting as advisors on the project, and will help with evaluating the project's outcomes.
The overall goal is to create a blueprint so libraries in low-income areas throughout California can sponsor summer meal programs in the future, said Natalie Cole, associative executive director of the CLA. She added, "Ultimately what we hope is that all kids in need can be served."

When schools close for the summer, so do the subsidized lunch programs that 50 percent of children in California depend upon. Yet according to California Food Policy Advocates' (CFPA) analysis of data from the California Department of Education, only 16 percent of eligible kids participated in USDA summer meal programs in 2011—leaving more than 2 million children in California in a vast summer nutrition gap.

And the data show that this gap is widening: over the past 10 years, summer meal participation has decreased in California by more than 50 percent. CFPA links this trend to the decrease in summer school programs throughout the state. With the loss of summer school programming, low-income kids are not only missing out on what may be their most nutritional meal of the day, said Patrice Chamberlain, director of CSMS, but "they're also missing out on summer learning and enrichment activities."

She added, "Sometimes learning is treated separately from nutrition, but they both need each other for children to develop in healthy ways. Kids need good nutrition so they can learn."

By partnering with food sponsors for the USDA's summer nutrition program, libraries are in a unique position to help curb some of the summer learning loss that occurs disproportionately in low-income kids.

"**Sometimes learning is treated separately from nutrition, but they both need each other for children to develop in healthy ways.**"

"Research shows that kids who read five or more books over the summer have less learning loss than kids who don't," said Cole. Yet she added that the availability of books and the encouragement to read are often what low-income kids are lacking -- and the situation is exacerbated when children are hungry.

"If kids feel well-fed, when they have literacy opportunities available to them they're going to engage more," she said. "By giving kids access to nutritious food and encouraging them to read, you're really keeping them healthy and engaged, and more ready to go back to learning in the fall."

Libraries in the pilot program will take advantage of lunch hour to boost participation in their summer reading programs for children and teens, where kids earn prize incentives for reading books, writing book reviews or attending cultural events. Libraries will also offer a wide range of enrichment programs for all ages —from book giveaways to writing workshops, comics and manga clubs, healthy food demos and nutrition-themed hip-hop performances.

OPL will emphasize gardening this summer, with plans to install raised beds in the main branch and host gardening workshops every Thursday. They'll also continue to run their seed library, where people can check out seeds and plant them. "We hope they'll grow their own vegetable gardens," said Villaseñor.

"Libraries are evolving with the times," he added. "We need to be more than a place to check out books and use the computers — we need to offer the services that the community needs."

UPDATE: The San Francisco Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families let us know that they also provide free lunch for kids under the age of 18 when school is not in session. The San Francisco program is available at 85 locations around the city. Here is the full list of San Francisco summer meal program sites.