Summer Lunch Program Filling the Void

By: Kristen Keleschenyi

Even though school is out, kids in Allegheny County are still having their nutritional needs met five days a week. Lunch is being served at 90 sites around the county including eight in the Homestead/West Homestead area. According to last year's numbers, more than 100,000 lunches were distributed and the numbers for 2016 are projected to be higher.

"It is truly needed," explains Lynda Black, operations manager from the Allegheny Department of Human Services summer food program. "Truth be told after the schools shut down for the vacation, the meal that we serve to some of the children in different communities may be the only meal that child receives."

"You'll see some of the kids come down from other sites to get another lunch," says Gerry Hawkins, site supervisor at Frick Park.

"For some of the kids that's the only thing they eat," adds lunch monitor Linda Schmidt.

There have been some changes to the program, which has been in existence for more than 30 years. The push is for healthier meals with a larger variety of fruits and vegetables. Some sites are able to offer hot lunches if they have a kitchen, but Frick Park is only able to serve cold lunches.

Hawkins says, "This is the first year we have a choice for lunches. It used to be lunchmeat on bread. But everything now is turkey based, no pork products for those who do not eat pork. They had the peanut butter and jelly Uncrustables before, and they brought them back, but instead of peanut butter they have sun butter with sunflower seeds."

Schmidt says even the breads are healthier with wheat buns and wheat wraps. "Back in my day we would look at that and say, 'I'm not eating that', but these kids are trying it."

"They now have some pretty good fresh vegetables where they didn't have, broccoli and cauliflower and things like that - they do have it now with ranch," says Hawkins. "Fresh spinach… and the kids have actually been eating some of it. I'm really surprised."

This year the variety of fruits goes beyond apples and oranges. There are fruit cups of watermelon and cantaloupe. Plus, there have been a variety of salads, including taco and chef salads.

Gerry Hawkins serves a lunch to Prez Johnson III at Frick Park.

Jamia Buckner watches as Maima and Jasim finish their lunches.

"We try different foods to let children get a chance to try things they probably don't try at home so this year we got a different menu and it seems like the children are really enjoying it too. We've got a lot of good feedback," says Black.

The lunch sites are offering more than just meals these days. The county makes activity kits available if requested. Hawkins has a crate filled with sidewalk chalk, balls and jump ropes. Through a partnership with the Carnegie Library books are distributed to the kids throughout the summer as well.

Black explains, "We are trying to give each child at least two or three books that they can take home with them. We have some AmeriCorp and Braddock Youth Program staff reading to the kids, if possible, as they are distributing books to the children at the different sites."

The county is also connected with the Allegheny County Parks Department and for the third year in a row will be providing free lunches at the Hometown Hoops Mini-Camps. These mini-camps are being held throughout the summer at various sites including: Hawkins Village in Rankin on July 27 and 28; Quarry Field Baseball Courts in East Pittsburgh on August 1 and 2; and the Charlie Batch Playground in Homestead on August 5. The free camps are for kids, ages 9-18, and will include basketball instruction from coaches and players with experience in the NBA, NCAA and WPIAL.

The last day for the county's summer lunch program is Friday, August 19. Hawkins' site averages around 50 kids each day. On Tuesday, Cheryl Crewe and her three children, showed up at Frick Park for the first time. Her family just recently moved to Homestead.

"We lived in New Castle and we had them [free lunches] up there but we just ran into this site. We were looking for the library," says Crewe.

Frick Park is an attractive site for many families due to the playground features. Crewe says they will probably be back as her two sons had a blast today running around and having fun. For Jamia Buckner, walking down the street with her little ones is a convenient option for lunch.

"Sometimes it is hot and you don't want to put on the stove," laughs Buckner.

Black says although some kids come for lunch without their parents, it is nice when families take advantage of some together time. "A lot of parents bring their children to the park and that is a good thing too because we like the parents to interact with the kids also if possible."

"When I'm at work and I see a family I tell them all about it," explains Hawkins. "You don't have to sign up. They are free and on a first come, first served basis for kids [up to the age of 18]. You don't have to be a certain income level or from a particular community. Just come by and get lunch."

Tuesday's lunch included a Sun Butter and jelly sandwich, fresh fruit, carrots, cheese, and milk.