

## Sarasota Housing Authority hosts 'Books and Badges' event with SPD

**Patricia McKnight** July 14, 2021



Kids begin to line up for new books during the "Books and Badges" event Wednesday. *Patricia McKnight/ Sarasota Herald-Tribune*

The Sarasota Police Dept. and housing authority joined forces Wednesday for the 7th annual "Books and Badges" event to bring books to underserved children in the community.

Officers paraded through Sarasota's Newtown neighborhood handing out books to children, with droves of smiling faces ready to pick through their brand new books. Breakfast was even provided by Chick-fil-a.

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The event happens every summer, a pivotal time for children out of school with what's often referred to as a "summer slide" — a regression of academic proficiency due to the break that hinders progress when kids return to school in the fall.

SPD Lt. Dwayne Shellhammer believes starting the community connection at a young age is crucial for their wellbeing.

“It’s really important that they (kids) can be able to approach us and feel safe talking to us when we don’t know what they’re dealing with at home,” Shellhammer said. “If there’s a situation, maybe they need help, and they need someone to talk to, and we want to be that voice for them and advocate for them.”



Isabella Taite was happy to receive new books Wednesday. *Patricia McKnight/ Sarasota Herald-Tribune*

Isabella Taite, 7, said she loves to read, especially Junie B. Jones books about a boisterous “soon to be 6-year-old.”

William Russell, president and CEO of Sarasota Housing Authority, says books are paramount for young children in grade school. It’s when they mostly develop reading skills.

“It’s the only way kids can develop and enhance their reading abilities,” said Russell. “We know that if kids you know struggle to read by third grade, they’re really going to struggle in school after that because the schools don’t teach them how to read after third grade.”

And that proves true. In fourth-graders, reading skills have been on the decline. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, average reading scores for students in grade 4 were lower in 2019 compared to 2017.

Briona Fashaw said she loves reading chapter books about different people. The soon-to-be third-grader interacted with officers giggling while she picked up her books.

It was an exchange more community members need to build healthy relationships with police, said Sarasota Mayor Hagen Brody.

“It’s critical and when it comes to dealing with public safety issues,” Brody said. “I think this is just a great event, and we’re doing a great job building those relationships, particularly at a young age.”



Inclusive books for Spanish-speaking children. Patricia McKnight/ Sarasota Herald-Tribune