



HUD Secretary Ben Carson visiting Sarasota Thursday

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He will be taking part in a book giveaway for children in subsidized housing.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson will visit Sarasota Thursday to take part in a book giveaway for children in subsidized housing.

“It’s something that’s very important to the secretary because of his personal experience with books,” said HUD spokesman Raffi Williams. “That’s how he was able to explore the world, even though he was a poor kid in Detroit.”

Carson is a former neurosurgeon and best-selling author who ran for president in 2016.

After President Donald Trump picked Carson to run HUD, the new secretary received help during the transition period from Sarasota Housing Authority President & CEO William Russell, who spent 90 days in Washington, D.C., as a senior advisor on the transition process.

Russell began a book giveaway program at the Sarasota Housing Authority in 2015.

Last year HUD officials chose Sarasota as one of 36 housing authorities to participate in a new program called Book Rich Environment, prompting Russell to expand the local book giveaway to include three separate events.

Local libraries, the Sarasota Community Foundation and the Education Foundation of Sarasota County provide additional support for the program, which is an initiative of the National Book Foundation.

With a shortage of affordable housing units, Williams said one of Carson’s priorities is helping subsidized housing tenants become self-sufficient “because that opens up a housing slot for another family.” Ensuring children are reading at grade level can be critical to their future success.

“If we don’t intervene at an earlier and earlier age they these children who are growing up in public housing are going to be our residents when they’re adults and that’s the last thing they want to see,” Russell said.

Russell plans to show Carson the extensive redevelopment that has occurred at the Sarasota Housing Authority in recent years, and brief him on plans for future redevelopment.

Carson's tenure at HUD has been rocky at times. He drew criticism over the purchase of a \$31,000 mahogany dining room set for his HUD office, and the agency recently was sued by housing advocates for suspending a rule aimed at desegregating subsidized housing communities.

In April Carson announced what the Washington Post described as a "far-reaching changes to federal housing subsidies" that include raising the cap on rents for some tenants and "making it easier for housing authorities to impose work requirements."

"There is one inescapable imperative driving this reform effort," Carson told reporters. "The current system isn't working very well. Doing nothing is not an option."

Russell said he believes this will be the first trip to Sarasota by a HUD secretary, but it's not Carson's first visit to the community. He appeared at Bookstore1Sarasota for a book signing at the height of his popularity in the presidential race.

The crowd was so big it spilled into the street, prompting police to shut down part of Main Street as a precaution. Bookstore1Sarasota ordered 800 copies of Carson's book about the Constitution. The store ran out and had to get more from Carson's entourage.

Carson signed 894 books during the roughly two hour appearance. It was the largest event ever hosted by the bookstore.