



by: Nicole Rogers
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SARASOTA, Fla. (WFLA) – One by one, children stepped off their bus and got ready for a “Christmas miracle.”

Sarasota housing authority paired 150 of their kids with local law enforcement Saturday morning to shop for holiday gifts at Target.

“It’s been great, said Sarasota High School SRO Paul Yonick. “The mother I’m with has 5 children.”

“They’re all over the place, but they’re having a great time,” he continued. “They’re all excited.”

From riding skateboards to getting their faces painted, it was an experience these kids will never forget.

Neither will their parents.

“Very grateful, said mother Christine Luetzow. “I’m very blessed that we were given the opportunity for the kids to grab a couple things they want for Christmas.”

It’s an initiative that began 11 years ago in an effort to help bridge the gap between residents of public housing and police.

“If they see a crime occur, they’re much more willing to talk to an officer they know and trust than an officer they’ve never seen before,” said Sarasota Housing Authority CEO William Russell.

Sarasota Police Chief Rex Troche says it’s important kids see police in a different light.

“Some agencies or departments talk about community policing, but can’t really define what they’re doing,” he said. “In the City of Sarasota, we really define it.”

“This is community policing,” he said. “We have our families here, so our children are here shopping along with us along with these other families and kids.”

“We’re engaging and having conversation,” he continued. “This really does build the bridges within our community.”

Santa’s advice?

“Be kind to one another and do the right thing.”

