

Community Connections

Jeff Shuster

School of Information, University of South Florida

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Professor Nancy Fredericks

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The DeSoto Public Library is the only public library facility in all of DeSoto County, Florida and is a part of the Heartland Library Cooperative. In other words, it is many counties for one library system rather than many libraries for one county like the system that I work for. The statistical research I had gathered for the county showed a 43.9 % employment rate that's below the state average and a 23.1% poverty rate that's above the state average (United States Census Bureau, n.d., Populations and People).

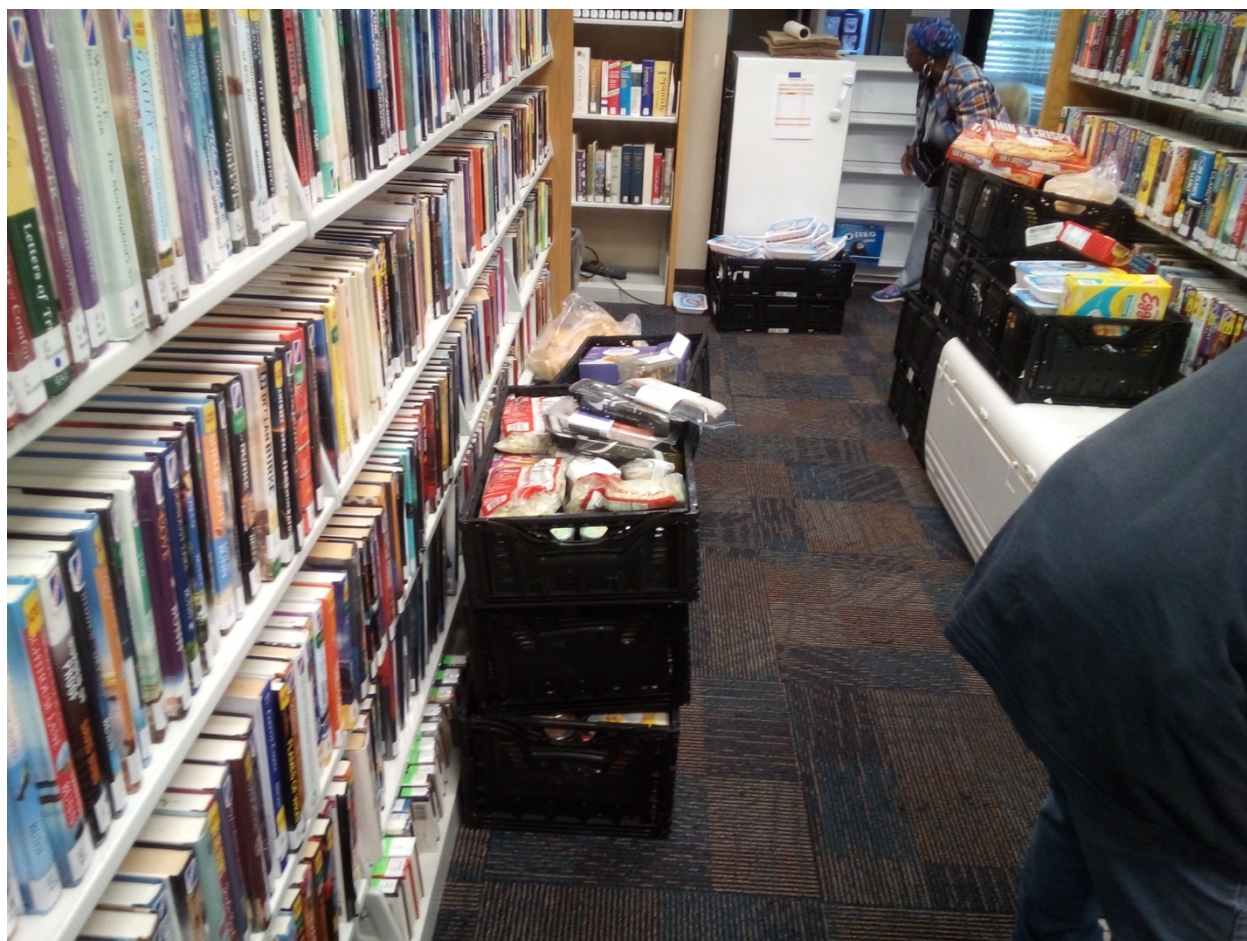
United for Alice states that DeSoto County consists of 12,340 households and that it is 62% below the Alice threshold. This is below the already low 46% for the entire state that doesn't meet the Alice threshold which means they can earn more than the federal poverty level, but not enough to afford the basics of where they live. These basics include adequate budgets for childcare, food, transportation, technology, health care, etc. (United for Alice, 2022, Alice in DeSoto County).

All Faiths Food Bank is an existing community partner for the DeSoto Public Library. They are a self-described hunger relief organization. Its mission is to alleviate hunger in the communities in Sarasota and DeSoto counties. Their priority is to "serve the neediest and most vulnerable first: children, seniors, veterans and people in crisis." Their number one priority is to feed their neighbors experiencing food insecurity. Through their mobile pantries, community members can receive fresh produce, meat, and groceries at various spots throughout the area (All Faiths Food Bank, n.d., About Us).

I was able to observe this feeding of the most vulnerable in the community firsthand. The DeSoto Public Library gives residents access to a family size pantry provided by All Faiths Food Bank. This includes two large refrigeration units for meats and frozen items and shelving for dry goods. Library tables are used for fresh produce.

Every Wednesday morning, the DeSoto Public Library receives a delivery from All Faiths Food Bank at around 9:30 AM. Volunteers overseen by Liz Coronado, the library director, sort through the goods dropped off by the delivery driver. I arrived at the library early to observe and even assist with the sorting of food. The whole process turns the DeSoto Public Library into a miniature grocery store.





I was taken aback by the quality of the goods being dropped off. Whole turkeys, whole chickens, frozen seafood, cereal, fresh tomatoes, lettuce, oranges, and frozen dinners.

Community members needing food assistance tend to stay away from fancier items such as sea scallops and racks of lamb instead going for familiar items such as hamburger. I got a tour of the bakery section that included several sweets like cookies and muffins. If they receive a whole cake, staff will ask anyone waiting for food if a family member has a birthday coming up.





At 1 PM, food distribution begins. Numbers are giving out to patrons needing food assistance. When a community member's number is called, they're let into the pantry area where volunteers help with their food selection. They are allowed three pounds of meat, two baked goods, and twelve dry goods. Food is rolled out on carts provided by the health department to each patron's car. There were about thirty families/individuals waiting for food at the time of my observation, but I've been told in prior week's there are well over a hundred showing up on delivery day.





As for a potential community partner, I chose Forty Carrots. According to the US Census Bureau, there are 427 male children under 5 years-old and 1,302 female children under 5 years-old in DeSoto County ((United States Census Bureau, n.d., Populations and People)). Originally founded in 1993, Forty Carrots mission is to nurture childhood development. This organization's stated values are that the family is the foundation of society and that the first five years of a child's life are essential to their learning and development in areas such as socialization, physical language, and cognitive ability (Forty Carrots Family Center, n.d., About).

I was fortunate enough to speak with Laura Josephson, the parenting education director at Forty Carrots. This organization is focused on assisting parents with childhood development no matter what their family income is. They do not charge families for their services and rely on

grant money rather than government funding to provide services. Forty Carrots serves 25 locations in Sarasota and Manatee Counties with over a thousand clients.

I was able to observe one of their Partners in Play sessions at the North Port Library in Sarasota County, the library I work for. Parents with children 5 and under get a ticket from the Children's librarian because there are only so many slots available. Two sessions are offered every Tuesday. Partners in Play can be a high demand program. Laura Josephson told me that they had to once turn away 29 families. This is why they offer two sessions per location.

Forty Carrots believes that a parent is a child's first teacher and Partners in Play sessions are all about guiding parents in their child's development. Activity stations with various toys are laid out in a circle on matts for the children to explore. This is a safe environment where children can play and socialize with other children while parents can form connections with other parents. With Partners in Play, parents learn how to be instrumental in their child's cognitive and social development. Staff are on hand to talk to parents. At the North Port Library sessions, one of the educators can speak Russian and Ukrainian as we have many families from those countries in our city.





The session closed out with the “Clean Up Song,” a song that I heard parents can later use when having their children clean up their toys at home. Parents and children can attend Partners in Play all year round except for May and June. Laura Josephson told me that libraries make great community partners because they are also focused on early childhood development and literacy.

When I spoke to Liz Coronado, she told me how she desperately wanted Forty Carrots to partner with the DeSoto Public Library. While I can’t get into specifics here, let’s just say that Forty Carrots is looking to expand their outreach next year. I think that Partners in Play would fundamentally change the lives of DeSoto County families and give these children a head start on their educational and social development. DeSoto County has the third lowest academic

achievement in the entire state, and I think programs such as those provided by Forty Carrots could improve that standing (Florida Department of Education, 2024, Report Card).

I am very grateful to Liz Coronado, Laura Josephson, and the staff and volunteers from the DeSoto Public Library, All Faiths Food Bank, and Forty Carrots for taking the time to inform me about their organizations and the impact they make on their communities. I think both are amazing community partners with a dedication to food justice, childhood development, and literacy. The community would truly be at a loss without these organizations and the service they provide.

References

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