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Photo Caption: North Sacramento residents enjoy a free barbecue, games and fair as part of United Way's kickoff of its free summer meals program for kids. For a list of sites serving summer meals, text FOOD or COMIDA to 877-877 or call 2-1-1.

UNITED WAY KICKS OFF FREE SUMMER MEALS PROGRAM WITH COMMUNITY CELEBRATION IN NORTH SACRAMENTO

SACRAMENTO – Dozens of North Sacramento residents attended a free community celebration at Robertson Community Center on June 11 to kick off United Way's free summer meals program for kids. The event, which was cohosted by Mutual Assistance Network, included family games and activities. Davis Joint Unified School District Nutrition Services provided barbecue to celebrate its partnership with United Way to provide free meals each weekday at various community sites so kids have enough to eat during the summer months when they are out of school. Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services distributed free produce at the event.

To find a list of sites where summer meals will be served, text FOOD or COMIDA to 877-877 or call 2-1-1.

“One in five kids in our region doesn't get enough to eat,” said Stephanie Bray, president and CEO, United Way California Capital Region. “That's why United Way started our Healthy Meals program so kids could have healthy, delicious meals during the school year with all kinds of fresh fruits and vegetables. But four out of five kids who participate in our Healthy Meals program miss out during the summer – that's more than 74,000 kids. So thanks to a grant from Sierra Health Foundation, we're working with community partners to make sure healthy eating doesn't stop when school is out.”

Meals are made with high-quality, minimally processed ingredients that are nutrient dense, low-sodium, have minimal preservatives and no high fructose corn syrup. The focus on local produce helps expose kids to a variety of fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables. Along with expanding to serve summer meals, United Way and its partners will be providing summer literacy activities at the meal sites to ensure kids do not experience what Bray refers to as “summer slide.”

“Kids who don’t read during the summer can go back to school in the fall up to three grade levels behind where they were when they left for summer break,” Bray said. “So we’re working with our summer meals sites to also provide educational activities while kids are already there for food.”

United Way believes education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty, and a healthy body is key to learning. Bray says kids in the capital region who graduate from college are 62 percent less likely to live in poverty than those who drop out of high school. So United Way is working with partners to increase the number of students who graduate from high school prepared for success in higher education. Bray says summer meals and learning opportunities are key.

“With bellies full of healthy food, and brains full of fun learning activities, kids will return to school in the fall ready to keep learning,” Bray said.

For more than 90 years, United Way California Capital Region has brought people together to meet pressing needs in the Sacramento region and has changed the lives of hundreds of children, families and adults in Amador, El Dorado, Sacramento, Placer and Yolo counties. Now the nonprofit is focusing on ending poverty through education by helping kids meet important educational milestones from kindergarten to career. To donate or volunteer, visit www.yourlocalunitedway.org.