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Lunch in the Park continues success



[Ryan C. Henriksen](#) |

Karen Lawrence, who was visiting Lunch in the Park with Girl Scouts, passes out wildflower seed packets to children Thursday at Douglass Park. The lunches are offered every weekday throughout the summer.

By [Avantica Khatri](#)
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At Lunch in the Park, many of the people stay the same from year to year, but things still look a little different every day.

Guests at the annual summer program range from members of the University of Missouri's women's soccer team to Girl Scouts and the bookmobile. The program provides free lunches for kids ages 2 to 18 every weekday through Aug. 12, except July 4, at Douglass Park, 400 N. Providence Road. The event hosts dozens of kids each day between 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., plus organizations from around the community that make appearances.

When it hit its 10-year anniversary last year, the program averaged 115 attendees. Cindy Mustard, executive director of the Voluntary Action Center, said she expects attendance to climb further this year. The average already is higher after the program's second week, at 117 kids a day, and it tends to grow after summer school ends.

Smithton Middle School prepares the lunches, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture reimburses the Columbia/Boone County Department of Public Health and Human Services for the children's meals.

"We don't want any child to go hungry over the summer," Mustard said. "Our mission is to give them a healthy, nutritious lunch. ... They're not just having chips and a Coke."

In an assembly line, the first volunteer grabs a bag containing a snack and utensils, and as the bag goes down the line, volunteers add items from coolers: a sandwich, vegetables and fruit, ending with, "Chocolate milk or white milk?"

Although the main goal is to offer nutritious lunches, the program also exposes the children to new activities. The Daniel Boone Regional Library's bookmobile is in its ninth year at Lunch in the Park. Every Monday, kids and adults can check out books.

The best part, said Sherry McBride-Brown, the library's regional youth outreach services coordinator, is "seeing the kids' expressions when they get the book, seeing them go take a book under the shade and read ... them telling us about the book."

Chanda Williams said her mother started bringing her to the park regularly starting around age 9. Now 20, Williams returns with her cousin and nephew, both around 1½ years old, while she often helps with one of the day camps that attend.

"Growing up, it's a community because every year they're going to have this," Williams said. "You'll see most of the same people that were here last year."

Kim Boyd, 12, just started coming to lunch this summer. "I just see that it's good food. If your mom's at work, you don't have to cook for yourself, and they're here for you," Kim said.

One of the youngest volunteers, Tierra Whitaker, a Hickman High School junior, is continuing her second summer with the program. She enjoys watching the kids — particularly when they dance. "They like doing the Michael Jackson 'Thriller' dance," she said.

Mustard, who has been in social services since 1965, finds the experience fulfilling for different reasons.

"Personally, it's to see the kids and see them having fun and know that they're having a good lunch today," Mustard said. "When we started 11 years ago, I got some of those kids that are pretty well-grown now or are in teenage years helping."

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