

Play in the Park and Summer Food Service Program offers FREE, healthy lunch and activities to New Bedford youth all summer long

I'm a firm believer that genuine deeds of kindness, selflessness and generosity deserve to be recognized. While most people I know that possess these traits aren't looking for the recognition, I think it is important to share because it not only shows the community the good that is therein but will become infectious. This is important for others to see, because it can soften the heart of the adult cynic, and will certainly be powerful in forming young minds and personalities.

Did you know that there is a program in the city whereby our youth can gather all summer to take part in supervised, safe and fun activities and also eat healthy meals to fuel up and have even more fun? There is and many aren't even aware of it.

The "Play in the Park" summer food service program that the New Bedford Parks, Recreation and Beaches operates is an absolutely stellar and generous program that has a powerful impact in the community. Promoting health, wellness, nutrition and outdoor activities are just a few of the objectives. What does that specifically entail for youth in greater New Bedford through the coming summer months?



It means that with over 20 outdoor sites throughout the city and new ones coming, there are many fun, safe, structured recreational and educational activities they can participate in and also enjoy a **free** snack or lunch. The goal is to get youth outside, stay active, make some new friends, sharpen social skills, and eat healthy during the summer months.

There is no need to sign up for anything – the only requirement is to be 18 and under and want to have a blast. Simply make plans and show up. These free youth activities take place at a variety of sites throughout the city that are strategically located in neighborhoods to maximize access for youth and/or are operated in collaboration with community partners who serve youth across the city. Want to plan to participate but concerned about rain? Not a problem as there are half a dozen indoor and covered sites. So, if you are a parent or guardian go right ahead and plan out the summer.

What I love about the way that the program determines the curriculum of a site's activities is that they are not rote pre-determined activities, but the staff is so packed with

creative ideas that they vary the day depending on the group of kids that show up that day. I call it “structured spontaneity” and it is a sure fire way to create a fun environment. A variety of crafts, games, and sports are utilized so as to appeal to every personality and interest. Even if your child is a bookworm there is something: the Art-Mobile and Book-Mobile also make visits to many of their sites.



A program of this caliber has to be spearheaded by people who care about the community and have a deep love for it. That way those characteristics trickle down to everyone involved. Like attracts like and if you have ever participated in any of the “Play in the Park” programs over the years, you know how evident this is and if you are planning on participating, you will find out.

“All of the staff in our program are New Bedford residents and it allows us to offer many summer positions and job training to them, especially to the many teenage employees we hire. For some of them this is their first job experience and then year

after year they tell us how much they love working in our program and being able to give back to their community.” states New Bedford Parks, Recreation & Beaches programs and events manager for Alexandra Matthews.

The program which facilitates and operates over 65 food sites throughout the city has been a smashing success by serving tens of thousands of meals to low-income youth since it has been running – in 2014 alone they served well over 82,000 meals. Think about the impact on the community this outreach has considering that for many kids it is the only real nutritional meal they will have all week.



While the Summer Food Service Program runs throughout the country, here in New Bedford the program is called “Play in the Park” and it has been running since at least the 1960s. “We strive to reach more families and give out as many meals as possible.” explains Mary Rapoza, the Director of New Bedford Parks, Recreation & Beaches. “Parents and grandparents

come into our office all the time and tell us their first job was working in "Play in the Park" and let us know about all the great memories they still have of working in the program or they'll tell us about their favorite thing they used to do with the staff as kids participating in the program."

The powerful effect of a program that gets the local youth together, gives them an outlet, way to have fun and get fed can't be stated enough. The positive impact on the community is articulated well by Summer Food Service Program Manager, Jasmine Vega "Many of the kids that show up at our "Play in the Park" sites come every single day and form a close bond with the staff in our program. It gives them a good role model to look up to and learn from. The staff knows most of the kids who come to their sites by name and what their favorite sports or crafts are and by the end of the summer the staff are always sad when the kids have to go back to school."

This highlights their "Of the community, for the community, by the community" ethos that drives everything that the program and everyone involved with it does.



There are two big events to kick-off the Summer Food Service Program/Play in the Park. The first event is “Family Fun Day” at Harrington Park on Thursday, June 28 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. which will feature Mayor Mitchell and the second is “Mad Science Day” at Gomes School Park on Friday, June 29 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Like all of their events, these two are completely free and include lunch for anyone 18 and under. There will, of course, be plenty of activities like face painting, henna tattoos, caricatures, the Bubble Guy, arts & crafts, sports, games and all kinds of hands-on fun.

Always with an eye on the future and looking to offer more to the community, a new site that will be accessible to all children including those with disabilities, called “Noah’s Place Playground” will open.

“We have so much going on this year at our kick-off events and we hope that lots of families will be able to come out and enjoy them!” enthused Alexandria Matthews. I am confident that anyone that shows up for these kick-off events will get a glimpse of that enthusiasm which is shared by everyone at New Bedford Parks, Recreation & Beaches. Once you get a taste of

the kick-off events, you will be starving for more and your kids will be tugging at your coattails to make sure plans are made for the summer involving the "Play in the Park."

Annual partners in the Play in the Park and Summer Food Program are the Mayor's Office, the New Bedford Public Schools Department, the New Bedford Housing Authority, the Boys and Girls Club, the YWCA, Community Boating Center, Trips for Kids, and many other community-based agencies. For more information about the program contact Alexandrea.Matthews@newbedford-ma.gov 508-961-3015.

New Bedford Parks, Recreation & Beaches

Monday-Friday: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. from June 27-August 24

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