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Officials celebrate opening of The Foodlink Kitchen

\$4.9 million capital project heralded by local leaders

ROCHESTER – It's been said that the kitchen is the heart of the home.

Foodlink, the regional food bank for the Rochester area, shared its sizeable heart with the community on Wednesday during an emotional ribbon-cutting ceremony for its new commercial kitchen.

Numerous state and local officials gathered at Foodlink's Mt. Read Boulevard headquarters to celebrate the 28,000-square-foot facility, which is designed to accomplish three distinct initiatives that take aim at reducing poverty and hunger.

The Foodlink Kitchen will: (1) Improve health outcomes among Rochester children by preparing thousands of nutritious meals for school lunch and after-school programs; (2) Support the state's agricultural economy by distributing more local produce through its Value-Added Processing Center; and (3) Lift people out of poverty by training hard-to-place workers for middle-skills careers in the food service industry.

"Our founder, Tom Ferraro, would be so proud of this day, and this amazing facility," said Foodlink Executive Director Julia Tedesco. "The Foodlink Kitchen truly represents our commitment to building the health and wealth of this community and is a tribute to Tom's innovative spirit and vision for ending hunger in our region."

Foodlink welcomed more than 225 people, including donors, stakeholders, and public officials to the ceremony, which included self-guided tours through the state-of-the-art kitchen. During Tedesco's opening remarks, she shared the "breaking news" that thanks to an additional \$200,000 gift from The Wegman Family Foundation, the \$4.9 million project is now fully funded.

As attendees mingled and enjoyed refreshments, it was business as usual for Foodlink's kitchen staff, which was hard at work preparing thousands of healthy meals for after-school programs and slicing apples in its Value-Added Processing Center.

“There is an ancient proverb that says: ‘If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime,’” Mayor Lovely A. Warren said. “By creating The Foodlink Kitchen, the people at Foodlink are proving that they can do both. An organization with a long history in the fight against hunger is now expanding the scope of that fight by helping our citizens emerge from poverty by learning to work in the food industry. Foodlink is a valued partner in our community, and I am grateful for all they do for our citizens. They are helping us create jobs, safer more vibrant neighborhoods and better educational opportunities for our citizens.”

Approximately 20 Foodlink kitchen employees transitioned from the old facility on Joseph Avenue to the expanded kitchen at Foodlink headquarters in early December. Meal production did not skip a beat and continued immediately. The staff prepares and delivers approximately 4,000 meals per day to dozens of after-school program sites across Rochester.

Foodlink’s Value-Added Processing Center installed its new, automated apple-slicing line in March. This will result in more partnerships with local apple growers and more healthy snacks for children. Foodlink will eventually pilot other types of “value-added” initiatives, such as butternut squash cubes, carrot sticks and cucumber coins.

“It’s clearly evident that Foodlink has placed a greater emphasis on health and nutrition in recent years,” said John Urban, President and CEO of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. “Healthy food is a powerful building block and has an enormous impact on a child’s life. We are proud to partner with them to help build a healthier community.”

The Greater Rochester Health Foundation’s gift of \$650,000 was among the most substantial donations it has ever granted. Empire State Development (\$1 million) and The Wegmans Family Foundation (\$500,000, plus \$200,000 announced Wednesday to close the fundraising gap) were among other high-profile donors for the \$4.9 million project.

“For many years, Foodlink has served as the centerpiece in the battle against hunger in the Finger Lakes region,” said Vinnie Esposito, Regional Director for the Empire State Development Finger Lakes Regional Office. “We are so honored to help this crucial institution extend its reach even further. The investment that facilitated the expansion of The Foodlink Kitchen will serve to create a hub of regional agricultural activity and job development resulting in a healthier community from which we will all benefit.”

Foodlink’s next chapter, its one-of-a-kind workforce development program, is still in the planning stages, with its first “class” of participants slated for late 2017. The yearlong curriculum will involve a series of intensive trainings designed to prepare an individual for a culinary career. Foodlink aims to welcome in 16 new participants every 12 weeks in an effort to close the skills gap that exists in the Finger Lakes food service industry.

“We know first-hand that there are culinary jobs out there, but there aren’t enough people with the required skills to meet those needs,” said Danny Wegman, Chairman of Wegmans

Food Markets. “Foodlink’s state-of-the-art kitchen rivals any commercial kitchen in our region, and the folks who will participate in this program will be well-equipped to fill those job openings.”

To learn more about The Foodlink Kitchen, visit www.foodlinkny.org; and to arrange a tour, please call (585) 328-3380.

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About Foodlink

Foodlink is a regional food hub and the Feeding America food bank serving Allegany, Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming, and Yates counties. Our operations both alleviate hunger and target the root causes of it by distributing food to a network of human service agencies, serving meals through our state-of-the-art kitchen, and offering more than 30 food-related programs.

In 2016, Foodlink distributed more than 19 million pounds of food, including more than 5.7 million pounds of produce. Foodlink’s nutrition educators empower people to make healthy choices and our Food Access programs provide new access points to nutritious food in underserved communities. Our innovative approach directly addresses diet-related health disparities related to food insecurity. Learn more about our mission to end hunger and to leverage the power of food to build a healthier community at www.foodlinkny.org.

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