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Summer Meals program innovates to reach more kids due to coronavirus pandemic

Free, grab-and-go meals available for all children across Rochester

ROCHESTER – As the COVID-19 public health crisis continues to limit food access and keeps children away from their traditional summer programs, the Summer Meals Partnership of Rochester is taking a new and innovative approach to ensure that all children 18 and younger have access to nutritious meals.

To encourage physical distancing, grab-and-go meal options will be provided and parents will be allowed to pick up meals without the children being present – which has been a requirement in previous years. Further, the partnership is introducing more “mobile meals” options for children due to the cancellations of summer classes, and reduced enrollment for summer programming and camps.

Foodlink, the City of Rochester and the Rochester City School District – which have been working together to feed Rochester children since schools closed in mid-March – collaborate with community partners such as Common Ground Health and the Rochester Area Community Foundation to organize and promote Summer Meals each year. The Foodlink Community Kitchen and the Rochester City School District prepare and deliver meals to dozens of sites across the city.

The coronavirus pandemic has reduced children’s access to healthy meals since schools closed in March, and many other summer programs have been suspended or altered to maintain safe environments for youth and staff. The traditional Summer Meals site of years’ past – where youth drop in during a scheduled time and sit down to enjoy a meal with friends – is no longer possible during the coronavirus outbreak.

To help increase healthy food access in Rochester, the partnership will be collaborating with the Regional Transit Service (RTS) to deliver meals to select neighborhoods that do not have an established Summer Meals site, such as an R Center, school, or church. This innovative new model, akin to an ice cream truck, will circle select neighborhoods and provide free meals all summer long.

“RTS has a long history of partnering with organizations in the Rochester region to connect people to important destinations and services,” RTS CEO Bill Carpenter said. “The Summer Meals partnership has always done a great job providing healthy meals to children each summer. During this COVID-19 pandemic, the team at RTS is happy to be a part of such an important program and looks forward to working with the partnership to find new ways to reach more children in the community.”

In addition, the City of Rochester and Foodlink also will increase its mobile meals program, which sends vans with meals to locations such as libraries and parks, where families often gather during the warmer months.

Parents can call 2-1-1 or visit www.SummerMealsRoc.org to learn more about 2020 Summer Meals sites in their neighborhood.

Last year’s Summer Meals program served nearly 250,000 meals – with an average daily participation rate of more than 3,920 children.

MEDIA AVAILABILITY: Please contact Mark Dwyer (contact info below) if you are interested in arranging a Zoom interview with any of the members of the Summer Meals Partnership listed below.

Dina Faticone, director of community health and engagement for Common Ground Health & co-chair of the Summer Meals Partnership of Rochester, said:

“As a parent, making sure my kids have healthy food throughout the summer can be challenging. The Summer Meals Partnership hopes to make things a little easier for all parents in the City of Rochester this summer by ensuring that every neighborhood has a summer meals location nearby, or a Summer Meals food truck that will visit their block.”

Maya Crane, program officer for equity, Community Foundation & co-chair, Summer Meals Partnership of Rochester, said:

“It has been a rough couple of months for families trying to feed their children during the pandemic. We hope that bringing food to neighborhoods throughout the summer will mean fewer children missing meals.”

Terra Keller, chief operating officer for Foodlink, said:

“Foodlink is always proud to support the Summer Meals Partnership of Rochester, and takes particular pride in the agility and innovation required to feed more children during this crisis. Our talented kitchen staff is always ready and willing to step up and prepare thousands of healthy meals, and develop new distribution models for Rochester’s youngest residents.”

Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres, commissioner for the City of Rochester Department of Recreation and Youth Services, said:

“Summer is about being out and being active. We are doing all we can to increase families engaging in the outdoors, especially this summer. We have improved our connection of summer activities to Summer Meals. Come on out to parks, R-Centers, school playgrounds, and spray parks, and combine enjoying the summer fun with enjoying summer food.”

Bandele Akinniyi, director of district support operations for the Rochester City School District, said:

“Now more than ever, this is the time we should do everything possible to provide meals to our students so that when we reopen schools, they will be ready and able to learn. Rochester City School District is working in partnership with Foodlink, Common Ground Health, City of Rochester and American Dairy Association North East to ensure we reach as many children as possible.”

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About The Summer Meals Partnership of Rochester

The Summer Meals Partnership is a collaboration among the City of Rochester, the Rochester City School District, Foodlink, Rochester Area Community Foundation, Common Ground Health and other community partners. The partnership leads year-round efforts to plan, promote, and continuously improve the Rochester Summer Meals experience. The primary purpose of the Summer Meals Partnership is to ensure that every child in the City of Rochester has access to free and healthy summer meals.

For more information, contact:

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