

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Channel One Food Bank to Partner with Rochester Public Schools on New Approach Addressing Childhood Hunger

Rochester, MN – Channel One Regional Food Bank and Rochester Public Schools (RPS) are partnering to help students attain consistent access to healthy food for the whole family. RPS and Channel One plan to focus their joint efforts on the schools and student populations that have the highest need and lack access to other community food resources. To determine these student populations, Channel One looks at the percent of kids on free lunch at a school, the community resources that are already in close geographical proximity to that school, and the poverty heat maps that the Rochester Public Library also uses for the book mobile.

Beginning this school year, both organizations will work to connect families with Channel One’s full-service food offerings, which include fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy, and shelf-stable products. Additionally, Channel One will be offering delivery of these services to homes if families lack transportation, removing the burden from children having to carry home food for themselves. This alternative will replace the Backpack program.

In order to better serve the students who need these services, RPS staff who interact daily with students, such as social workers, will receive training from Channel One about how to refer students to resources that can consistently meet their needs.

To serve neighborhoods with concentrated food security needs, RPS and Channel One will collaborate to offer Mobile Market events in these specific neighborhoods. Channel One will also provide RPS social workers and support staff with ‘food stability boxes,’ which will contain two days of shelf stable meals for a family of four while staff work to connect them with full-service offerings.

Channel One Food Shelf has seen a nearly 40% increase in shopping visits since January – a historic increase in need, far exceeding the demand the food shelf experienced in the height of the pandemic. This is also the first school year in two years that families will need to sign students up to receive free and reduced school lunch. High grocery and gas prices and the impacts of inflation are hitting families hard, and RPS and Channel One want to make sure that students have the nutritious food they need to learn and grow.

“We know that the Backpack program is beloved by the community and was an innovative program when it started over 10 years ago,” explained Virginia Merritt, Executive Director at Channel One, “However, we’ve learned a lot of lessons about the ongoing need for food in our community because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Channel One’s community engagement efforts through our co-design project, and this new wave of need driven by inflation. When a student does not have enough food to eat, there are usually others in the household who are also in need. Over the last two years, we have learned the value of training people that families trust, like school staff, to connect families to robust resources. We have also learned how to efficiently distribute food via Mobile Markets to communities with access barriers.”

“Food is a basic need. We can’t expect our students to do their best and participate well in their education when they are lacking this basic need, or when they are worried about family members who don’t have access to food,” said Dr. Kent Pekel, superintendent of Rochester Schools. “This partnership between Rochester Public Schools and Channel One gives the opportunity to not only meet the needs of the students, but also their families.”

Merritt continued, “The partnership that Channel One had with RPS during the pandemic, where we worked alongside Student Nutrition Services to hold school meal distributions so that families could get ‘Channel One food’ and ‘school lunch’ in the same location, was transformative for the community. School meals are vital to student nutrition and, along with SNAP, are the most important factor in preventing hunger in Rochester.”

Rochester Public Schools will identify locations that are underserved by existing food programs, where Channel One can host Mobile Markets as well as provide prepared meals from Channel One’s Minnesota Central Kitchen program. Together, Channel One and RPS are taking on a new systems-transformation approach to address hunger in the Rochester community.

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ABOUT CHANNEL ONE REGIONAL FOOD BANK

Channel One Regional Food Bank, a member of Feeding America, strengthens food access and builds healthy communities. Channel One operates food programs to serve local and area needs such as: a food bank, a food shelf, mobile pantries, Childhood Hunger Programs, and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Channel One Regional Food Bank mobilizes organizations, volunteers, and donors to serve the network of nearly 200 nonprofit programs that provide food for children, adults, and families in need. Channel One serves 14 counties across southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. For more information, call 507.287.2350 or visit helpingfeedpeople.org

ABOUT ROCHESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Rochester Public Schools, located in Rochester, Minnesota, has the seventh largest enrollment in Minnesota and covers a large part of Olmsted County and extends into Wabasha County. The district’s pre-kindergarten through grade 12 program serves approximately 18,000 students in sixteen elementary schools, four middle schools, and three comprehensive high schools. The district also offers various alternative schools and six district-wide programs. Rochester Public Schools’ educational program is designed to reach all students. Rochester Public Schools participates in School Nutrition Programs and accepts Applications for Educational Benefits for free and reduced-price school meal benefits. Applications are available at rochesterschools.org/families/student-nutrition/free-and-reduced-meals.