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**More Summer Meals, More Students Served in 2013,
But Strategic Approach Needed to Further Boost Participation**

ROCHESTER, NY — The first year of a coordinated, communitywide approach to get more youth from low-income families in the city of Rochester to take advantage of free summer meals met with some success.

Efforts by the many partners involved in this effort to spread the word about the availability of free meals resulted in a 3 percent boost in daily participation — from 5,195 to 5,376 — and more than 325,889 meals served throughout the summer, a 2.5 percent increase. This data, tracked by the New York State Education Department, also was analyzed by the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency before being released today.

A 20 percent annual increase in participation through 2016 had been the goal of the Summer Meals Planning Committee, a collaboration of the City of Rochester, Foodlink, Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency, Rochester Area Community Foundation, Rochester City School District, and other partners.

“That 20 percent goal was very ambitious, but necessary given the needs in our community,” says Mairéad Hartmann, a program officer for Rochester Area Community Foundation and member of the Summer Meals Planning Committee. “We will keep the goal to increase participation by 20 percent each summer until most city youth 18 and younger take advantage of these free meals.”

A summer meals program is particularly important to the Rochester community, which has the seventh-highest child poverty rate in the nation. A recent report released by the Community Foundation and ACT Rochester found that Rochester is the fifth poorest city and has the third highest concentration of extremely poor neighborhoods in the top metropolitan areas around the country.

The focused promotion on summer meals resulted in the distribution of 7,000 more meals over the course of the summer and halted a downward trend in meal participation. Since 2010, the meals program had experienced a 15 percent decline in participation.

The partners in this effort made the location information available through a variety of efforts, including:

- Posting a list of locations on several websites;
- Making the list available to the staff of 2-1-1 and in patrol cars of the Rochester Police Department;
- Displaying colorful banners along city streets near meal distribution sites;
- Notifying City School District parents through automated calls with pre-recorded messages and print communications sent home at the end of the school year;
- Recording a public service announcement featuring the mayor, the superintendent and police chief and playing it throughout the schools and sharing through social media;
- Initiating a peer-to-peer promotion by having youth involved in the Youth Voice, One Vision program orchestrate a texting flash mob with summer meals information; and
- Creating a second public service announcement that aired on WDXK-FM radio.

“We can do more. There are still nearly 16,000 children and teens who eat free meals at school during the school year that we need to reach and convince to regularly stop in any of our community’s 60-plus sites,” says Dina Faticone, program manager for the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency’s Healthi Kids initiative. “We want to help families struggling to make ends meet so they don’t have to skimp on healthy meals to pay for other essentials.”

The Summer Meals Planning Committee is encouraged by the gains and is gearing up for Summer 2014. They will be implementing the following new strategies to increase participation in this summer’s free meal program:

- Hiring a part-time summer meals coordinator to focus on this initiative and the community goal. The coordinator will be employed by Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency through funding provided by Rochester Area Community Foundation and will be positioned to implement and support the strategies of the Committee;
- Planning for a new, targeted approach to address specific neighborhoods in the city of Rochester and strategize how best to increase their meal opportunities and participation;
- Engaging the Ad Council for Greater Rochester in strategic planning and implementation of a coordinated community awareness and marketing plan;
- The Community Foundation will offer up to \$18,000 in mini-grants to support volunteer coordination or equipment that will allow community partners to provide additional summer meals and/or to supplement days of service in Summer 2014. The mini-grants of \$500 to \$5,000 will be announced online at www.racf.org and via email in early April, with grant awards to coincide with the launch of summer meal programming in 2014;

- Partnering with Food Research and Action Center and the National League of Cities for technical assistance and training made possible through a Cities Combatting Hunger through Afterschool and Summer Meals Programs grant given to the City of Rochester; and
- Partnering with Hunger Solutions New York for advocacy support at the state level.

The importance of summer meals was the focus of a March 2013 report by the Center for Governmental Research, which found that as many as 16,000 youth from low-income families in the city of Rochester are missing out on free summer meals made available to meet their nutritional needs while school is not in session.

Because of the city's poverty level, all children under age 18 are eligible for free summer meals, but only about 5,000 students have taken advantage of the free program.

To get more youth involved in the summer meals program, the CGR report called for a coordinated, communitywide approach to boost participation by 20 percent a year. Meeting that goal would mean nearly half of the target population would be served by 2016. The report said to reach the annual goal it will be essential to increase awareness of summer meals to school officials, parents, other family members, and community groups, and make it easier to find meal distribution sites by going online or making a phone call.

The summer meals program is designed to provide food to youth under the age of 18 when the regular school year is not in session. Begun in the mid-1970s and administered by the U. S. Department of Agriculture in conjunction with the New York State Department of Education, the program allows community-based organizations to participate, in addition to school districts.