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FINAL



Connecting kids to meals

Every day people make decisions about their next meal. For many of us, the only decision we have to make is what we want to eat. However, thousands of families and children in northwest Ohio face an entirely different question each and every day. They wonder where their next meal will come from and often don't have enough to eat.

In Ohio, 1 in 4 children face hunger according to Share Our Strength's recent hunger study. We know that many Toledo families are living right at the poverty line. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 40 percent of Lucas County children live in poverty, and Toledo's overall poverty rate is around 26 percent. There are more than 54,100 children in Lucas County eligible for free and reduced price school meals.

Connecting Kids to Meals is a driving force behind providing hunger-relief to vulnerable children and families. To more fully reflect the nonprofit's mission and unite northwest Ohioans in the fight against childhood hunger, the organization changed its name from Feed Lucas County Children and adopted a new tagline: "Connecting Kids to Meals; Nourishing Families. Changing Lives." The announcement was made in January 2017.

Better Understanding Connecting Kids To Meals

"This name and branding change represents a deep commitment to our mission and public engagement on the issue of child hunger," said Wendi Huntley, President of Connecting Kids to Meals. "We are confident that our new identity – generously created in-kind by Toledo-based Thread Marketing Group – will cast a broader net and invite the public to better understand and commit to helping us fight childhood hunger."

Thread CEO Judy McFarland further explained, "Appealing imagery coupled with clear messaging will allow the people of northwest Ohio to quickly associate with the brand; thereby motivating them to become educated on the hunger issue and take action. The nonprofit's efforts to engage the public will have faster results because the new name and branding are inclusive, direct and action-oriented, which will translate to a better use of our modest resources."

Connecting Kids to Meals was founded in 2002 to serve children and families living at or below the poverty line in Lucas County. Today, the mission has expanded to reach children in Wood County and beyond. In 2016, the nonprofit provided 5,000+ children with free hot, nutritious meals at 105 different locations during the summer months. During the academic year, over 1,000 meals are provided to children in low-income areas enrolled in 26 after-school programs.

Nonprofit's Mission Has Expanded

Not only has the geographic footprint expanded, but the nonprofit's mission has been strengthened to further help families and communities through providing healthy meals to children. In the fall of 2015, the nonprofit started working with Cherry Street Mission Ministries to maximize the community's resources and strengthen each of our organization's efforts to address hunger and poverty. The partners have broken ground on a state-of-the-art kitchen that will be used by both nonprofit agencies to help feed those in need and improve their lives. This new kitchen, opening this summer, will give the two organizations the capacity to provide over a million meals per year – significantly increasing the current capacity.

Connecting Kids to Meals has received financial support for the kitchen build from the State of Ohio and generous community partners such as Mercy Health Foundation, The Anderson's Charitable Foundation, The University of Toledo, Lucas County Port Authority, Lucas County Commissioners, Marathon Classic and others. Without these resources and other contributions to Cherry Street, we could not accomplish our goal of having a new joint kitchen.

"This year, we are elevating the issue of hunger to a higher level of relevance," said Huntley. "A child who is hungry and cannot learn becomes an adult that cannot earn. With 13.1 million children in this country at risk of hunger, this is an issue of critical concern in the state of Ohio and across America."

Dietary Behavior & School Success

A 2014 Centers for Disease Control report on health and academic achievement, found that students' dietary behavior has a direct effect on school success, and that when students receive breakfast at school through the United States Department of Agriculture School Breakfast Program, they see "increased academic grades and standardized test scores, reduced absenteeism, and improved cognitive performance."

Huntley continued, "The bottom line is: The ultimate impact on hunger will only be experienced when the public is significantly more engaged and more informed. Our new name and brand identity represent a crucial step in the right direction."

"Many organizations such as Connecting Kids to Meals, Mercy Health, Toledo Public Schools, Partners In Education, the YMCA/JCC of Greater Toledo, and ProMedica, among others, are working together as part of a new collaboration called Summer Meal Partners of Northwest Ohio, to insure that our most vulnerable residents, our children, don't have to wonder where their next meal will come from and to offer fun, educational programming," said Lucas County Commissioner Pete Gerken. "It's heartening to see such efficient collaboration and cooperation involving so many stakeholders in our community. It is a great success story for our region."