

# Foodlink Kitchen ready to serve Rochester schools

By: Velvet Spicer June 14, 2017

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More than 200 people gathered Wednesday to celebrate the opening of the Foodlink Kitchen.

The 28,000-square-foot commercial kitchen was built at the regional food bank's headquarters on Mt. Read Boulevard. A ceremony included donors, stakeholders and public officials, who received tours while staffers prepared meals for after-school programs. Funding for the \$4.9 million project was made possible primarily through donations and grants. Greater Rochester Health Foundation granted \$650,000, while the Wegmans Family Foundation gave \$500,000. Foodlink also received \$1 million from Empire State Development Corp.

"It's clearly evident that Foodlink has placed a greater emphasis on health and nutrition in recent years," GRHF president and CEO John Urban said. "Health food is a powerful building block and has an enormous impact on a child's life."

The goal of the new facility is to improve health outcomes among Rochester children by preparing nutritious meals for school lunch and after-school programs, as well as support the state's agricultural economy by distributing more local produce through its Value-Added Processing Center.

The Foodlink Kitchen also is designed to lift people out of poverty by training hard-to-place workers for middle-skills careers in the food service industry, officials said.

"Our founder, Tom Ferraro, would be so proud of this day, and this amazing facility," Foodlink executive director Julia Tedesco said. "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."

Ferraro founded Foodlink in 1978 and was among the first "food bankers" in the nation. Under his leadership, Foodlink grew into a 500-member organization distributing more than 19 million pounds of food and resources each year to area soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters, group homes, senior centers, day cares, after-school programs and other nonprofit organizations.

Foodlink runs more than 30 unique, food-related programs aimed at ending hunger, improving nutrition, empowering individuals with food literacy and strengthening the regional food system.

“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,’” Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren said. “By creating the Foodlink Kitchen, the people at Foodlink are proving that they can do both.”

Foodlink, with its long history in the fight against hunger, is expanding the scope of that fight by helping Rochester’s citizens emerge from poverty by learning to work in the food industry, Warren added.

Some 20 Foodlink kitchen employees transitioned from the organization’s previous facility on Joseph Avenue to the expanded kitchen on Mount Read Boulevard in December. The staff prepares and delivers roughly 4,000 meals a day to dozens of after-school program sites across Rochester.

“For many years, Foodlink has served as the centerpiece in the battle against hunger in the Finger Lakes region,” said Vincent Esposito, Empire State Development’s regional director for the Finger Lakes. “We are so honored to help this crucial institution extend its reach even further.”

The investment that facilitated Foodlink’s expansion will serve to create a hub of regional agricultural activity and job development resulting in a healthier community, Esposito said. Foodlink’s next project, a one-of-a-kind workforce development program, is in the planning stages, officials said. Its first class of participants is slated for late 2017.

The yearlong curriculum will involve a series of intensive trainings designed to prepare an individual for a culinary career. Foodlink will accept 16 new participants every three months in an effort to close the skills gap that exists in the Finger Lakes food service industry. “We know firsthand that there are culinary jobs out there, but there aren’t enough people with the required skills to meet those needs,” Wegmans Food Markets Inc. chairman Danny Wegman said. “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.”

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