Cereal donations will help feed children in Aroostook County this winter

PRESQUE ISLE – Staff at Aroostook County Action Program are collecting cereal boxes that will form a “Community Giving Tree” to display at St. Apollonia Dental Clinic’s Festival of Trees, and, new this year, they are inviting the public to drop off cereal box donations at any of ACAP’s nine locations throughout the county or bring cereal to leave by the ACAP Tree at this year’s festival.

This is ACAP’s third year of participating in the Festival of Trees in an effort to both raise awareness of hunger in Aroostook County, and to collect cereal boxes to distribute to children who attend their early care and education centers, as well as stock two Community Cupboards in Presque Isle and Houlton.

“Food insecurity is a very real issue in our communities. Our staff across Aroostook County work with individuals and families to provide comprehensive services and meet multiple needs, including addressing hunger issues,” said Jason Parent, ACAP Executive Director. “The Community Cupboards that started in Aroostook County at our Main Street Presque Isle and Military Street Houlton facilities, and have since popped up in towns across the region, are helping people meet their immediate food needs when other resources are not accessible or available. The cereal collected during this annual drive helps stock the shelves of these cupboards, many of which are located outside, during the cold winter months when other food products would freeze.”

Several weeks leading up to Festival each year, staff at ACAP host an internal cereal drive, bringing in hundreds of boxes of nutrient fortified cereal. During the Festival of Trees at Northern Maine Community College the first weekend in December, volunteers use those boxes to construct a large “tree” display, complete with decorations that children from ACAP’s early care and education centers make. While most of the impressive trees on display at the Festival invite participants to place tickets in buckets for a chance to win the display, ACAP’s Community Giving Tree has a unique twist. Instead of winning the tree of cereal, participants show their support for ending hunger in Aroostook County by placing their tickets in the bucket understanding that local grocers have pledged to match tickets collected with additional boxes of cereal.

ACAP Family Coach Heidi Rackliffe first spearheaded the project three years ago. The inaugural year was a resounding success that far exceeded expectations. Star City, Hillside and Mars Hill IGAs, had pledged to match up to 250 tickets collected with cereal boxes. Rackliffe said they were hopeful, but unsure how many they would actually collect, and ended up with nearly 1,200 tickets. That prompted the organizers to invite all Aroostook County grocers to pledge a donation the following year in hopes of matching even more of the tickets. Several more grocers from Houlton to Fort Kent participated the second year.
"Our Community Giving Tree is an opportunity to start a conversation about hunger and express empathy and compassion for others at a difficult time of year," said Rackliffe. "I watched parents come by our display with their children and read the sign we placed in front of it explaining the tree's purpose and then those kids placed one or more of their valuable tickets in our bucket. Watching young children make a conscious choice to help others just warms my heart."

This year, Shannon Hill, of ACAP’s Energy and Housing staff, is coordinating the Community Giving Tree project, and she wanted to give the public even more of an opportunity to express their support by inviting them to drop off cereal donations at ACAP locations.

“The idea is to feed even more people by making this year’s cereal tree bigger than ever before,” said Hill. “The more cereal we collect, the more people benefit.”

ACAP will distribute the cereal boxes to each of the children who attend their early care and education programs as they leave for the break between Christmas and New Year. The remaining boxes will stock ACAP’s community food cupboards during the winter months when people are most vulnerable to hunger.

If you are interested in making a cereal donation, then you can drop it off during business hours at any ACAP location, or contact Shannon Hill at 764-3721 for information. Community members are also welcome to bring boxes of cereal to the Fifth Annual St. Apollonia Dental Clinic Festival of Trees at Northern Maine Community College on November 30, December 1 and 2, and leave them by the ACAP Cereal Tree.

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ACAP provides the people of Aroostook County with services and resources that help individuals and families achieve greater economic independence. As a leader, or in partnership with others, ACAP provides guidance to the community in responding to emerging human needs in the areas of community health, early care and education, energy and housing, and workforce development services. For more information on ACAP, or to make a tax-deductible contribution, please contact the agency at 771 Main Street, on the web at www.acap-me.org, or by calling 764-3721.