ACAP and JMG work together to fight hunger in Aroostook County

AROOSTOOK COUNTY – Community service is far from new to students who are part of the JMG (Jobs for Maine Graduates) program at Caribou High School, but a recently formed partnership with Aroostook County Action Program, and a network of community partners, is expanding JMG students’ ability to make a difference in a much broader community.

For the second year, JMG students are collecting non-perishable food items to help combat food insecurity in their communities. Last year’s effort produced approximately 2,200 cans, boxes and bags of food, which they then donated to a local food bank. This year, students hope to improve upon the initial success, aiming for 3,000 food items, and were looking for a way to spread the bounty of their donation to reach more people in the community. That’s where ACAP came into the picture.

“The students believe that hunger is the largest social issue that citizens of Aroostook County face. Students decided that they wanted to have a food drive that would benefit not only residents of Caribou, but would reach surrounding towns in need of help. With the idea of reaching multiple communities, I thought of ACAP,” said Dr. Valerie Ann Waldemarson, JMG specialist at Caribou High School. “I spoke with my students about providing a donation to ACAP and they loved the idea. The idea of reaching people all across Aroostook County really motivated them.”

JMG students began collecting food prior to the winter break in conjunction start of the school’s Winter Carnival. Their collection efforts continue for 21 days. By the end of Winter Carnival week, the students had already collected more than 1,200 food items with time to collect more. A team from ACAP met with JMG earlier that week to discuss their partnership and how best to distribute the food donation to affect the most Aroostook County communities, from the southern and central regions to the St. John Valley. A year and a half ago, ACAP erected easy-access food cupboards at locations in Presque Isle and Houlton. Since then, a network of similar cupboards have begun popping up in communities all around the region. ACAP Family Coach Heidi Rackliffe has connected with that network of food cupboards to coordinate a pick-up of the donation that will stock cupboards in Mapleton, Perham, Wade, Washburn, Caribou, Mars Hill, Presque Isle, and Houlton. To further the reach, and to make sure food makes it into all regions of Aroostook County, ACAP will distribute food throughout its nine locations from Fort Kent in the north to Dyer Brook in the south.

Rackliffe reached out to the network of grass roots food cupboard organizers and the response to the donation was immediate. “Within moments of sending out an email, I had responses from cupboards who are eager for donations, which demonstrates how very real the need is throughout Aroostook County. Sometimes it’s hard to know when a friend or neighbor is suffering because they don’t always talk about it. They may be embarrassed or too proud, which is part of why these food cupboards have found success because they allow a level of anonymity in a small community.”
Caribou JMG Senior and President of the JMG Career Association, Apollo Grodin, says he is excited about this partnership with ACAP, “I believe that ACAP will help JMG carry on their mission of community service and aid in the promotion of food security through Aroostook County with this food drive. It is my hope that this carries on for years to come. Neighbors helping neighbors. That is what it is all about.”

JMG students in Caribou performed more than 1,200 hours of community service last year, and have already exceeded that number for the 2017-2018 school year. Some of their time has been spent at multiple Caribou Recreation Center events, and also volunteering at the Caribou Marathon, Caribou VFW, United Veterans of Maine, concessions for all sporting events, food drives, Blankets for Babies, American Legion Jacket Drive, wrestling tournaments, basketball tournaments, Anti-Bully Walk, and Caribou Craft Fair – to name a few.

“When a student joins the JMG Program, they become part of a Career Association that focuses on Career Development, Leadership Development, Social Awareness and Civic Awareness to include Community Service. JMG curriculum is delivered in a variety of ways: through discussion, guest speakers, field trips, hands on creative projects, interactive lessons, games, ice breakers, movies, job fairs, community service projects, statewide competitions, skyping, and lectures,” said Waldemarson. “I focus on teaching essential life skills by meet students where they are and encouraging students to step outside their comfort zones through community service projects, team-building, and public speaking.”

The JMG students community service work has increased their awareness of social issues in their community, and their hearts and attitudes towards giving have only grown through their experiences, says Waldemarson. Caribou JMG Freshman Alaina Cotts believes that food insecurity is an issue within Caribou and that even though they are young, students, as members of the Caribou Community and Aroostook County have a role and responsibility to educate and take a proactive role in combatting this problem.

ACAP will receive the food donation and begin distributing to community cupboards by the end of March. The agency and JMG are hoping this partnership may lead to other opportunities for the two service-minded organizations to find ways to work together towards making life better in Aroostook County.

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ACAP is celebrating 45 Years of Making Life Better in Aroostook County! 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.
JMG (Jobs for Maine Graduates) is a not for profit organization that partners with public education and private businesses to offer results driven solutions to ensure all Maine students graduate, attain post-secondary credentials and pursue meaningful careers. JMG was created in 1993 and continues working with students in a public education setting. JMG has more than 100 programs throughout the state, working with approximately 7,000 students statewide. To date there are four Aroostook County High School Programs currently in Caribou, Houlton, Hodgdon and Fort Kent and one College Program at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. The JMG Program in Caribou started with the August 2016 school year and has flourished. This program represents students from all RSU39 sending schools from the towns of Limestone, Van Buren, Stockholm, New Sweden, Conner Township, Caswell, and Woodland. JMG is the only not for profit in Maine that offers a continuum of support to help students transition each step of the way from Middle School, all the way through College and into their career pathways.

(Left to right) Caribou High School JMG Senior Sheridan Blackstone and Caribou High School JMG Senior Margeaux Beaulieu and just a small amount of the food the JMG students have collected.