ACAP employees find creative ways to help bridge the Summer Gap

PRESQUE ISLE – On Wednesday, August 9, Aroostook County Action Program staff and volunteers visited with children in Presque Isle as part of their sponsorship of United Way of Aroostook and TAMC’s Summer Gap Feeding Program, designed to provide nutritious foods for children who are not yet back in school.

Planning for ACAP’s day of Summer Gap Feeding Program sponsorship began months ago with an internal agency effort spearheaded by ACAP Case Manager and Licensed Social Worker Heidi Rackliffe. Rackliffe heard about the Summer Gap Feeding Program on the local news and knew she wanted to help, it didn’t take much to convince others at ACAP to embrace the idea.

“I wanted to take an active role in helping with this great project, knowing that the large portion of the children being served could be ACAP clients in one way or another,” said Rackliffe. “It seemed like a natural partnership and activity that works directly with the mission and vision of our agency.”

The cost for sponsoring a day of feeding local children was $500 ($2.50 per child) and so Rackliffe came up with an idea to raise that money by tapping into the generous spirits of ACAP staff. First, she enlisted Job Counselor Kathy Williams’ help. They took her idea to Executive Director Jason Parent and then presented it to the Employee Engagement Committee at ACAP, finding everyone eager to participate. Rackliffe’s idea was to have staff sponsor paper cutout “Little People” that they could then decorate and display in ACAP centers. The cost of sponsorship for one cutout person was $2.50, the exact cost of sponsoring a meal for one child.

“I believe fundraisers and projects go better if there is a visual or something for people to become active in the project,” said Rackliffe. “We got a cutout from [ACAP Project Coordinator] Karen Sawyer for the little people and then Kathy had her aunt’s scrapping booking group make about 300 little people for us. It got really fun for folks, I think. People named a cutout person after someone special to them, created and personalized their family, and had fun knowing it all went to a great cause”
As employees purchased the cutouts and decorated them, they set up displays at ACAP’s main office in Presque Isle and at both Gouldville and Caribou’s Early Care and Education Centers.

“The display became quite a conversation starter for community members who came into the Main lobby. And at our early care and education centers, children gravitated to the display, stopping to look at all the little characters on the wall. All of the offices continually said how much fun they had and how much they enjoyed the project,” said Rackliffe. “Caribou brought me $84 and told me how much fun they had with it and that they love project[s] like this and want to do more. It so warms my heart.”

In fact, employees enjoyed the project, and the cause, so much that they exceeded the original $500 goal, also contributing money they raised as a group on Casual Fun’D days in the office, where employees can dress down for $1 on Wednesdays. Even the community decided to support the Summer Gap Feeding Program when parents at the Gouldville Center decided to donate proceeds from a community art night where they sold children’s artwork and craft projects. Altogether, ACAP employees raised $745 and Gouldville supporters added an additional $178.

“We aimed at raising $500 to be able to fully sponsor a day of the Summer Gap feeding program,” said Rackliffe, “but the excess funding will allow the program to purchase more, and perhaps better quality, food.”

ACAP staff were far too engaged in the project at this point to end their efforts at donating money to help feed vulnerable local youth, however. So, on Aug. 9, seven ACAP volunteers assisted with food preparation at Presque Isle Recreation and Parks, and then served lunch at satellite locations throughout Presque Isle, including on Birch Street, Carmichael Street and at Helen Noreen. The Summer Gap Feeding Program also offers meals at the Mapleton Recreation Department. In addition to offering food, volunteers also gave away bubbles and pencils to the kids and had activities for them to do when they came to pick up their lunches.

“The outstanding results from our employee-driven effort to support the United Way of Aroostook’s Summer Gap Feeding Program are truly reflective of the dedicated and caring staff that comprises our ACAP Family,” said ACAP Executive Director and CEO Jason Parent. “Our team works each and every day, in partnership with vulnerable families and individuals across Aroostook County, to help ‘make life better.’ We have led, or partnered with others on numerous initiatives to address the issue of food insecurity. When members of our staff first heard of this effort by the United Way, they felt it important that our agency be a part of this community solution and rallied co-workers across the agency. Their approach, using the little people, added a fun and inspiring element to the project.”

ACAP works regularly in partnership with United Way and TAMC, and those collaborations benefit the communities in which those partner agencies serve. ACAP served a total of 170 meals to children on their day. Those meals consisted of a choice of sandwiches, water, fruits, and snacks.

“Collaborations such as these give us the ability to serve even more people by meeting a variety of needs, in this project’s case, meeting the needs of hunger. Statistics show that every 1 in 4 children in Aroostook County go hungry or aren’t sure where their next meal will come from,” said Rackliffe. “The Summer Gap Feeding Program creates a solution
for a problem that was affecting some of our younger, most vulnerable children in the community. This was a community project at its finest.”

The Summer Gap Feeding Program continues through September 1.

“ACAP employees’ generosity never ceases to amaze me. The staff always wholeheartedly gets behind and supports any concept, project or idea that involves helping the community. The community’s support in this project has been overwhelming. To see the amount of folks that have come together to rally behind this effort truly shows what Aroostook County is all about,” said Rackliffe.

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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.

Aunika Rae, 3, was excited to receive her lunch and goodies from ACAP during their sponsored day of the United Way and TAMC Summer Gap Feeding Program.
Kids lined up to choose their lunches, which included some extra, non-food treats from ACAP like new pencils just in time for the start of the school year and bubbles for some summer playtime fun.