



Athens County

Athens Families Receive Food Just in Time for the Holidays

Summary

Due to high rates of poverty and food insecurity, extended school breaks put a financial burden on many Athens County families. Because of this, Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) and the Athens City School District collaborated to open a school based food pantry. Beyond increasing food availability to the district's families and the community, the pantry aims to provide guidance in healthy food preparation and meal planning. Generous donations from the food drives organized by the school's parent teacher organization (PTO), equipment purchased through CHC funding, and strong leadership from the school administration and staff made opening day a possibility before the holiday. The first distribution was a success with 27 families served and plenty of smiles to go around.

Challenge

Athens County has one of the highest rates of food insecurity in Ohio; about 29 percent of children are food insecure (Map the Meal Gap, 2013). Furthermore, with 30 percent of children in Athens County living in poverty, extended school breaks put a financial burden on the families that qualify for free and reduced meals as well as the many families who fall just short of the qualifications (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2015). CHC, parents, staff, and PTO from Athens City Schools worked together to send food bags home with students in the 2014-2015 school year during extended breaks. However, logistical issues and the difficulty of taking two weeks' worth of food home on the school bus made stakeholders wary of repeating the process. Therefore, a school based food pantry was proposed to provide more regular availability of food to the district's families and community residents in need.

Solution

Collaboration was truly the key to success. CHC worked closely with the school nurse to secure a location and apply as a member pantry of the Southeast Ohio Regional Foodbank. CHC funds were used to purchase necessary equipment, such as a refrigerator, a freezer, shelving, and cooking demonstration supplies. Fliers were sent home to the district's families, and the local 2-1-1 resource was notified about the pantry's opening. Food donations made it possible to open the pantry before the holiday. Canned goods and other nonperishable food items were donated through a food drive organized by the schools' PTO. Athens City Schools also partnered with Community Food Initiative's (CFI) Donation Station for distribution of fresh produce to the pantry.



Results

On December 16, 2015, the Athens City School food pantry opened and served 27 households consisting of 65 adults and 51 children. More than 2,000 food items were donated from the East Elementary food drive, including beans, rice, legumes, canned vegetables and fruit, peanut butter, pasta, dry cereal, and local food items. The Athens Catholic Communities food pantry donated dry milk and bread. Sweet potatoes and squash were acquired from CFI's Donation Station. In total, the pantry reached 116 people on its opening day. Healthy recipes and food samples were available to patrons, compliments of CFI. Pantry coordinator, Heidi Mowrey, noted that the families served were incredibly grateful. "We had so many thank-yous and kind smiles given to us that night by both kids and parents," said Mowrey. "I am proud of the quality of food that we are giving out to our families, and I hope we will continue to grow to help our friends and neighbors."

"A young student was hesitant to take the sweet potatoes. As I showed him a recipe from the produce guide I had given him, his eyes lit up and he grabbed several potatoes. Looking to his mom and pointing to the recipe he exclaimed, 'Mom, we have a meal!'"

*— Krystle Kalafut,
food pantry volunteer*

Sustaining Success

The Athens City School food pantry will continue to be stocked in a variety of ways thanks to multiple collaborators. As a member pantry of the Southeast Ohio Regional Foodbank, the Athens City School pantry has access to the purchase program; furthermore, the PTO continues to collect food items through food drives and collect monetary donations. Most significantly, developed partnership with CFI and the refrigeration capacity provided by CHC allow for continued produce distribution. Guidance in healthy food preparation and meal planning will be sustained through collaboration between the CFI and Athens City School AmeriCorps service members, as they will be offering food sampling and cooking demonstrations for the pantry. A huge key to success has been the invested interest, participation, and leadership from school administration, parents and staff. The need for food is ever present, and the pantry exemplifies that innovative solutions are made successful when genuine, caring individuals collaborate.

Your Involvement is Key

- The Athens City School food pantry is open the third Wednesday of every month from 4-7 p.m. If you would like to volunteer or donate to the pantry, please contact Heidi Mowrey at hmowrey@athenscsd.org or 740-797-4544 extension 226.
- Want to donate to your local pantry? Food items, such as canned beans, canned fruit in 100 percent juice, canned vegetables without added salt, whole wheat bread or pasta, and bags of brown rice are great donations. You can also donate time by volunteering with your family!



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