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Poverty Hits Home *Comlinks uses ARRA funds to Help Feed Children in Need*

Malone, New York – According to a newly released report by the New York State Community Action Association (NYSCAA) 6,779 people, including 1,690 children in Franklin County live in poverty and of all families living in poverty, over 50% are headed by single women with children. These alarming statistics are contained in NYSCAA's *2010 New York State Poverty Report* released on March 17th.

“Even before this report was due to be released, we knew that families in Franklin County were struggling in the recent economic downturn with everyday living expenses and that many children were routinely hungry” said Brian Cassini, Executive Director of Comlinks, Franklin County's Community Action Agency. “Through our Gleaning Program that provides supplemental food and nutrition education to over 65 area food pantries and from our family advocates, we became acutely aware that often the only nutritious meals many children were receiving was through the free and reduced lunch programs at school. We wondered; what do these families do to make sure their children are eating healthy meals outside of school?”

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 gave Community Action Agencies throughout the country funding to take swift action and create immediate response programs to assist low-income families in local communities struggling to keep their heads above water. Three initiatives proposed by Comlinks were funded through the NYS Department of State's Community Services Block Grant Program including a Harvest Kitchen for creating added value to fresh produce processed through its Gleaning Program to extend shelf life for year-round distribution to food pantries; a Veterans Entrepreneurial Outreach Program to provide business counseling and entrepreneurial start-up assistance to area veterans returning from overseas conflicts; and the Emergency Backpack Program launched in October 2009 to help stabilize local families struggling in this recession.

The Backpack program uses ARRA monies through the Community Services Block Grant to purchase backpacks, supplies and food to provide an “emergency backpack” full of healthy and easy to prepare food that elementary school aged children bring home on weekends when school is not in session and school breakfast and lunch is not available. Home school coordinators helped Comlinks identify those children most at risk and the first year of the program has enough funds to provide weekly backpacks to roughly 350 elementary aged

children in the Malone, Chateaugay, Brushton-Moira and St. Regis Falls school districts. Through the invaluable assistance of home-school coordinators and community volunteers that pack the bags each week, Comlinks is able to operate the program with a single paid staff person and at a cost of \$200 per child per year for food.

The program's success can be measured in part by what it couldn't do; provide backpacks to all of the children in the area that could use this help. "When Mr. LaVigne, Comlinks Backpack Program Coordinator, approached me about the program, I immediately said 300 kids could use this program just in Davis School alone" said Helen Tracy, Davis Elementary Home School Coordinator. "This program has meant so much to these children and their families. 271 families applied for the program and Comlinks was able to accommodate 100. I certainly hope that adequate funding can be sought to expand the program next year."

"Support from the community at large has been tremendous," said Backpack Coordinator Richard LaVigne. "When I began recruiting volunteers for the program and speaking to community groups, people were shocked that so many young children in our area were going without adequate food on the weekends because their parents were struggling to work several part-time jobs, pay rent and utilities. Once they saw the need, they opened their wallets and we began an adopt-a-kid program where a \$200 donation will fill those backpacks for 1-year. To date we've received almost \$6,000 in donations that will help keep the program going."

"That this is a problem affecting working families is important to note," said Denise Harlow, NYSCAA's CEO. "This program really benefits working people who are struggling. 27% of those living below the poverty line in Franklin County are employed. If you factor in that a family of three making more than \$18,310 is not considered poor and go uncouncted in the poverty rates, then you can only imagine how many families try to get by on very little yet are not considered "poor" by federal standards."

"The Backpack Program helps children eat healthier so they can do better in school. They are the future of Franklin County and we need to do all we can to help them succeed so we are not looking at an 18.5% childhood poverty rate in Franklin County when the 2020 report comes out. That would be simply unacceptable," concluded Brian Cassini.

NYSCAA's 2010 New York State Poverty Report can be found on-line at www.nyscaaonline.org.

Comlinks main office is located at 343 West Main Street in Malone. They also have an office at 19 Church Street in Saranac Lake to serve the residents of southern Franklin County. More information about Comlinks can be found on the web at www.comlinkscaa.org or by phoning 483-1261.