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News

Midday Magazine

# Pioneer uses Giving Tuesday to fund 19 Capital Region non-profits

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Alexander Babbie

Pioneer Bank CEO Tom Amell with Pioneer employees and representatives of local charities in Albany on Giving Tuesday, December 3rd, 2024.

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A Capital Region bank marked Giving Tuesday by supporting Capital Region nonprofits.

20 \$5,000 grants will go to 19 organizations that support children in need, with four of them supported by Pioneers with Purpose grants funded by donations from Pioneer employees.

Announcing those grants at a ceremony, Pioneer President and CEO Tom Amell says grant recipients help support the Pioneer Charitable Foundation's mission of "Helping Kids be Kids."

We want to provide them with the food, the clothing, shelter, the education, the safety, a warm bed. Those are our problems as adults. We own those for our children, right? So as Pioneer, we're taking those on for our kids as much as we can, so a kid can just be a kid," Amell said.

Organizations awarded Tuesday include the Brunswick Cares Community Food Pantry, CAPTAIN Community Human Services in Clifton Park, Connect Center for Youth in Cohoes, and Schenectady Community Action Program.

Amell says each of the recipients were suggested by Pioneer employees who are directly involved with the organizations.

Pioneer chief human resources officer Susan Hollister, who also co-chairs the Foundation, says it's part of an ongoing culture of service at the bank, with many employees volunteering for charitable causes.

"They serve on boards. They work with inner-city and adaptive sports programs. They build beds for children. They collect school supplies. They teach in classrooms. They paint rooms, they clean up and build gardens. And perhaps most importantly, they mentor and teach children," Hollister said.

Kishani Choudhury, a business banking development officer with Pioneer, nominated CAPTAIN. She says its Street Outreach program is vital in addressing human trafficking in the Capital Region.

"Schenectady, apparently, is the hub, and where they bring in a lot of kids, they transport these children back and forth through all the different interstates that go through there. And it's huge. It's right in your neighborhood. If you don't look for it, you won't see it," Choudhury said.

Choudhury says her family has long been involved with CAPTAIN, starting when her mother worked there about 25 years ago.

"Then throughout the years, when my dad retired, he actually he and my mom both helped with the after-school program they used to help serve meals. And then my son, when he was a senior in high school, he actually helped organize a sweatshirt drive," Choudhury said.

Fern Hurley is CAPTAIN's Associate Executive Director. She says the grant will support the Street Outreach program, which started about a decade ago. Hurley says the Outreach team tries to meet kids where they are, from the streets to libraries and schools.

"They bring these kids food and water, snacks, warm hats, warm gloves. And they don't make judgments. They just make friends with the kids and say, if you need help, we can get you to a safe place," Hurley said.

Brunswick Cares Food Pantry, based in Rensselaer County, was nominated by Jill Walsh, who manages the Pioneer branch in Brunswick. Walsh says three generations of her family have served the pantry.

"We are assisting in the collection and distribution of food to local families and to students at the local school," Walsh said.

Pantry treasurer Bob Clark says his organization is facing acute challenges addressing food insecurity. He notes, in Rensselaer County, the rate of school-age children who are food insecure stands at 16.9 percent.

"A local school district has a population of approximately 1,100 students, which means that roughly 179 students in that population are food insecure," Clark said.

Clarke adds they feed an average of 61 families monthly, including more than 40 children. He shared a story about a school nurse who was talking to an elementary student about what they'd done for Thanksgiving and was told they'd had frozen pizza and nothing more.

"They got to talking, 'well, what did you have for Thanksgiving? What did you guys do?' 'Well, we had a frozen Elio's pizza.' Started probing, and come to find out that mom is working three jobs, dad is incarcerated, and there's three kids in the family, and this elementary school, young girl is in charge of them at home," Clark said.

Pioneer's Sam Burke, who nominated the Schenectady Community Action Program, says she was inspired by her friendship with Julie Halsdorf, SCAP's Family Services Coordinator, and the organization's mission to lift families out of poverty.

"Through their Early Learning Program, they offer enriched learning experiences and foster emotional and social growth while also engaging and encouraging a hands-on approach from the parents. A family is only as strong as its roots, and through their programming at SCAP, they're helping to provide the family with the tools to grow strong," Halsdorf said.

Naomi Wood is Director of that early learning program. She says her organization supports more than 8,000 people annually, and related a story of one family SCAP supported in the past who wasn't able to stay at a homeless shelter.

"Mom was really struggling and concerned that she was going to need to quit her GED because of being homeless. So we actually worked with the family. And the family would come on to our site, drop the child off, knowing that their child was safe," Wood said.

Wood says the mom was also able to use a laptop at a SCAP office so she could finish her education.

Also announced Tuesday was a \$5,000 grant for Cohoes' Connect Center for Youth. Josh Hill, who manages Pioneer's branch in the Spindle City, says he first visited the Center this year and was blown away by the services available to children.

"Aside from after-school programs, the center also offers classes on things like cooking in a professional kitchen. There's STEM and STEAM learning, engineering classes. There's music education, like musical production and even sound engineering," Hill said.

The Center also has a food pantry and backpack program, among other services.

Funding for 10 more organizations supported by Pioneer — Community Action of Greene County, Albany County's Crossroads Center for Children, Focus Churches Community Food Kitchens and South End Children's Café, Schenectady County's Things of My Very Own, Rensselaer County's Hope 7, Saratoga County's Student First Project, and regional organizations Girls Inc. of the Greater Capital Region, Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless, and Pride Center of the Capital Region — came through Small Business Recovery Grants through the Federal Home Loan Bank of New York.

Additionally, the Pioneer Charitable Foundation supported grants to the Albany Community Action Partnership, Schenectady County Food Council, Friends of Hudson Youth, StreetSoldiers Rensselaer, and a second grant to the Capital Region's Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless.

Tags



**Alexander Babbie**  
 A 2022 Siena College graduate, Alexander began his journalism career as a sports writer for Siena College's student paper, The Promethean, and as a host for Siena's school radio, WVCR-FM "The Saint." A Cubs fan, Alexander hosts the morning Sports Report in addition to producing Morning Edition. You can hear the sports reports over-the-air at 6:19 and 7:19 AM, and online on WAMC.org. He also speaks Spanish as a second language. To reach him, email [ababbie@wamc.org](mailto:ababbie@wamc.org), or call (518)-465-5233 x 190. You can also find him on Twitter/X: @ABabbieWAMC.  
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