



# COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Providing children, adults, and families an effective support system to assist in obtaining self-sufficiency and a safe, stable, healthy living environment



## PRESENTS FOR KIDS 2023 IS HUGE SUCCESS

The Child and Adult Protective Services Division hosted its annual Presents for Kids Campaign during the months of November and December 2023 as a way for the community to help the children of Portage County Job & Family Services (PCJFS) who may be struggling through a difficult season. PCJFS received an abundance of community support in providing a memorable Christmas for the 178 Portage County children who were living in foster placements this season.

The Presents for Kids Campaign hosted a Holiday Toy Drive-Thru on Saturday, December 2 at the Portage County Administration Building where PCJFS volunteers collected new, unwrapped toys and monetary donations from vehicles as they drove through the parking lot with their campaign donations. Many community members, businesses, and organizations also donated gifts throughout the season directly to the offices of Portage County Job and Family Services.

As in past years, wish lists for PCJFS kids in care were placed in businesses throughout the community as an opportunity for



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residents to encourage children at Christmas. Residents were able to take a wish list, purchase specific items and return the gifts, which were then collected and distributed to Portage County children.

Thanks to the generosity of the Portage County residents, businesses, and charitable organizations, the most recent Presents for Kids Campaign was the most successful one ever! This fantastic collaborative effort ensured that the most vulnerable children of our county each received at least six Christmas gifts for 2023. Shawn Kelly, a supervisor with Child and Adult Protective Services, reminds us why the Presents for Kids Campaign is so important: "While Christmas gifts do not take away the pain that these children so often experience, we are glad to be able to put a smile on their faces at least for one day as they open up these amazing gifts from our community."

We are so grateful for a generous community that partners with us as we seek to provide children, adults, and families an effective support system to assist in obtaining self-sufficiency and a safe, stable, healthy living environment. To get involved in the 2024 Presents for Kids campaign, please contact Audrey Riley, Public Information Officer, at [audrey.riley@jfs.ohio.gov](mailto:audrey.riley@jfs.ohio.gov).



## Presents for Kids 2023 Campaign Partners

We couldn't have done it without you!  
And, there are countless others who  
dropped off gifts at our offices...  
Thank you for your generosity!

- Wayland Community Church
- By the Dawn's Early Light
- Northeast Ohio Medical University
- Munn Chiropractic
- PCJFS Staff
- Kent Displays
- Ravenna area churches
- Aurora Police
- McMaster-Carr Supply Co.
- D&J Property Restoration, Inc.



# CALENDAR CONTEST WINNER IS A FIRST FOR PORTAGE COUNTY

## CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT AGENCY

Each August, in support of Ohio's Child Support Awareness Month, the Portage County Job and Family Services Child Support Enforcement Agency participates in a state-wide coloring contest. This contest invites children in the county to submit hand-drawn, hand-colored artwork for submission to be entered for a chance to be published in the state's Child Support Visitation Calendar. These calendars are intended to help children and parents with their schedules of visits and other important events in a way that is fun for the child.

Portage County has never had a winner selected for this state-wide calendar contest... well, that is, until now! Meet Xandria, currently age 8, who drew and colored a fantastic autumn-themed, original piece of art which was chosen at the state level to be published in the 2024 Child Support Sticker Calendar!

Recently, when presenting Xandria and her family with her award, Xandria enthusiastically proclaimed, "I never thought at all that I would win!" Xandria's artwork features a large hand-traced turkey among some trees and a mailbox. Xandria explained that her great-grandma had just recently showed her how to draw a turkey like this before she made her drawing for the contest. Xandria was grinning ear-to-ear with excitement as she talked about her love of art. She said she considers herself very artistic but also loves basketball and football. Additionally, Xandria recently received a good student award at her school. After only spending a few minutes with Xandria, it was obvious she has many passions and dreams. She never stopped smiling.

Xandria's family attributes much of her artistic ability to the time spent with her great-grandmother. "That has a lot to do with her art skills," her mother said. "She is also very artistic."

Xandria is looking forward to this year's contest. She plans to submit another one-of-a-kind piece of art.



*Xandria, Portage County coloring contest winner, with CSEA Supervisor Zara Burkett, as she was presented with a small gift and some copies of the calendar.*



*Xandria's winning calendar artwork, which is featured on the November page*

# BENEFIT BRIDGE HEADS INTO 2024

## OHIOMEANSJOBS

Benefit Bridge, a pilot program funded by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, has a goal of assisting vulnerable populations in Portage County with obtaining long-term self-sufficiency. In 2023, the program was able to serve 64 individuals, helping to bridge services for those who are transitioning from unemployment or low-income employment to a more self-sufficient level of earnings.

### **A Recent Benefit Bridge Success Story:**

Meet “Susie” and “John,” both facing the challenges of homelessness in their lives and residing at a local homeless shelter. In 2023, they had a turning point when they discovered opportunities provided through the WIOA training program, designed to empower individuals with skills they need to secure employment. After being determined eligible, both were enrolled in the OhioMeansJobs/Kent State Manufacturing Internship Program. This program equipped them, not only with valuable technical skills, but also with a sense of discipline and teamwork.

The two progressed through the program, their dedication and perseverance evident to both instructors and the employers they were placed with. Upon completion of the training program, they were deemed eligible for the county’s Benefit Bridge program. With the support and incentives of the Benefit Bridge program, the couple was able to purchase their own vehicle and obtain an apartment. To date, both are still employed, and “Susie” has even been promoted. The two continue to strive toward the goals they have next set for themselves. OMJ, along with the Benefit Bridge program of Portage County, will be there to continue offering support as they launch forward.

OhioMeansJobs Portage County is proud to be a participant in the Benefit Bridge program, making a difference in the lives of those we serve. Below is a summary of some changes to the eligibility and re-enrollment to the program for the 2024 year:

### **Eligibility:**

- Employed SNAP and/or PFCC household experiencing a decrease in benefits or proposed closure due to earned income in the prior 60 days; or
- Minimum Bridge Score of 44 for entry; not eligible if Bridge Score is 88 or higher.

### **Re-Enrollment:**

- Individuals who had a previous neutral or negative exit from the program and re-apply for the program can have a one-time re-enrollment
- All incentives issued from the first enrollment count toward the \$8000 cap
- Second-chance entry score must be higher than the initial entry score by 4 points

### **Incentives:**

(Maximum Incentive per individual=\$8000)

- Minimum incentives offered for enrolled participants
  - ▶ Employment (employment retention, new/better job, pay raise, promotion with pay raise)
  - ▶ Education (any increase in education level, certificate or course)
  - ▶ Financial Literacy (completion of financial literacy course, opening a savings account, paying down debt)

BENEFIT BRIDGE



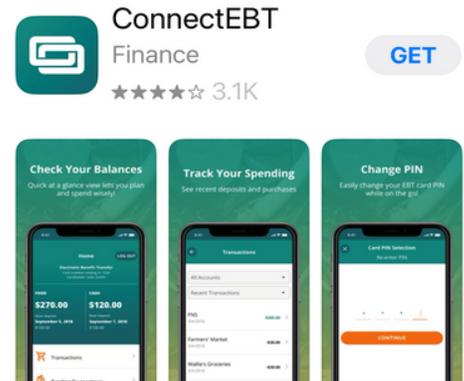
**OhioMeansJobs.**  
Portage County  
A proud partner of the  
American Job Center network

# PROTECTION FOR SNAP BENEFITS

## PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services is making an effort to protect clients' SNAP benefits by utilizing various tools to help detect fraud. An influx in recent activity alludes to the potential that criminals could be targeting clients' SNAP benefits. To protect these benefits from being fraudulently stolen, the State and the Public Assistance division of Portage County Job and Family Services are urging all SNAP recipients to take protective, preventative measures:

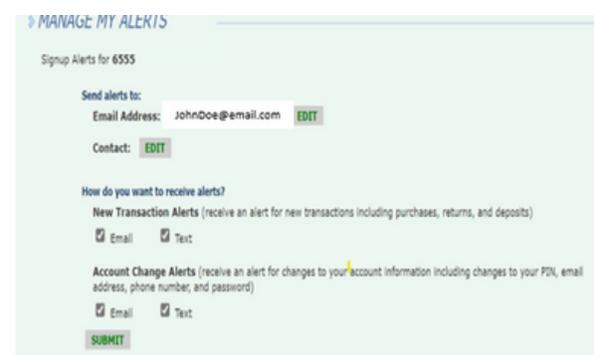
- SNAP recipients should change their PIN as soon as possible. They can do this by calling the number on the back of their EBT card, visiting the EBT Cardholder Portal at [www.connectebt.com](http://www.connectebt.com) or by using the ConnectEBT Mobile App. (In order to utilize the Mobile App, SNAP recipients must have registered/created an account on the EBT Cardholder portal).



- SNAP recipients have the ability to lock their EBT cards using the ConnectEBT App and online using the [EBT Cardholder Portal](#). SNAP recipients are encouraged to select the 'Lock Everywhere' option when not actively making a purchase. When ready to make a purchase, simply 'Unlock' the card again. Utilizing the Card Lock/Unlock feature reduces the risk of benefits being fraudulently stolen.



- Lastly, SNAP recipients can also sign up for email and text alerts on the Connect EBT Mobile App and the [EBT Cardholder Portal](#). SNAP recipients can choose to receive alerts for new transactions (purchases, returns, deposits, etc.) and if there are changes made to their account (address, PIN, password, etc.). These alerts will help recipients to manage activity on their account.



SNAP recipients should contact the EBT customer service line at 1-866-386-3071 regarding any issues.

# MANUFACTURING INTERNSHIP PROGRAM MOVES AHEAD

## OHIO MEANS JOBS

OhioMeansJobs Portage County held a graduation ceremony in November 2023 to celebrate the five graduates who successfully completed the 7th Manufacturing Internship Program (MIP). The MIP is a ten-week program that combines paid, on-the-job training at a local manufacturing facility with classroom instruction from Kent State University to form a path of success for interns. The MIP interns have the opportunity to earn manufacturing certificates from KSU while simultaneously earning a paycheck from the employer they are placed with. OMJ also walks alongside the interns, providing additional supportive services like transportation and clothing vouchers, as needed, while they train.

MIP has seen much success through the years, with this most recent graduation class showing no exception. In fact, two graduates in November 2023 graduated with perfect attendance. Each participant was certified in Manufacturing Readiness, Lean Six Sigma and OSHA.

"As an agency and an OMJ family, the work that we do and the lives we help change by working together is second to none. It is a beautiful thing to witness these individuals leave with certifications that will change the trajectory of their lives," said OMJ Supervisor Carly Spencer.

MIP 8.0 begins on March 4, 2024. Applications are now being accepted for interns for this round of the program. For more information, call (330) 296-2841 or email [Carly.Spencer@jbs.ohio.gov](mailto:Carly.Spencer@jbs.ohio.gov).



"Faith is taking the first step,  
even when you don't see  
the whole staircase."

Martin Luther King, Jr.



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***AGENCY IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER AND SERVICE PROVIDER.***