

# Hunger HEROES

The Community Foundation has been the central hub for alleviating Collier County's skyrocketing food insecurity

The Community Foundation of Collier County has been at the forefront of the pandemic's cascading food insecurity crisis since it started spiraling out of control in March 2020. And according to nonprofit leaders, the calamity won't be ebbing soon.

The Community Foundation sprang into action when the crisis hit with its Collier Comes Together for Coronavirus Relief Fund, raising \$274,922 and another \$155,000 from other donor partners to help local food pantries ease the food shortage. The local government also enlisted the Foundation to distribute \$5.5 million in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) funding in Collier County and another \$5 million in tightly restricted American Rescue Plan Act funds, managing a total of \$10.5 million in public funding. The Foundation took this course of action because it could use its cash reserves to expedite funding to eligible food banks and food pantries, including smaller pantries that may have had trouble qualifying with the county, while also simplifying the application process.

That's the good news. The bad news: While food insecurity has eased, demand far exceeds pre-pandemic numbers and is projected to remain high for the following year. All while Collier County's most at-risk residents continue to stabilize their finances as the economic recovery remains uncertain and novel coronavirus variants spread.

Catastrophic increases in demand have overwhelmed Collier County's food pantries. St. Matthew's House "is seeing a 3,000 to 4,000 percent increase in families coming to us for food assistance compared to our pre-pandemic need," reports Peter Johnson, vice president of development at St. Matthew's House. Its food pantry went from serving 9,127 each month in June 2019 to 17,395 in June 2021 (with a high of 20,238 in March 2021).

Food pantries and volunteers like this one from St. Matthew's House focused on getting the word out to help as many as possible.

Below: Volunteers at Our Daily Bread Food Pantry greet the lines of cars with enthusiastic smiles and the desire to help.



"The working poor are the first affected by an economic crisis, and they are also often the last to recover," Johnson adds. "We anticipate a sustained need for food assistance well into 2021 and even 2022. The most vulnerable—the elderly, single parents with children, and the disabled—will continue to need food assistance long after the worst economic effects of the pandemic subside. Thanks to partners like the Community Foundation of Collier County, we will be able to continue to address the need this year and next."

At Our Daily Bread Food Pantry on Marco Island, Liz Pecora, vice president and director of development, says that many have been asking if there is still a desperate need to help people with food. "Our monthly average volume [households and individuals served] jumped fourfold from 2019 to 2020 and is up another 140 percent in 2021," she explains. "This year has proven to be no less challenging than 2020. As the effects of the pandemic continue, we are committed to serving as a trusted and reliable food resource for Collier County, with the generous support of our community."

Harry Chapin Food Bank of Southwest Florida has been distributing an average of a million pounds of food each week to roughly a



A volunteer offers compassion and a personal connection as well as meals at a St. Matthew's House drive-through food pantry.

quarter of a million people each month in the five-county region. In its 2018-2019 fiscal year, Harry Chapin distributed 26.8 million pounds of food, that shot up to 32.4 million pounds in 2019-2020. "The millions of dollars in CARES funding that the Community Foundation brilliantly brokered made a tremendous difference to Harry Chapin's COVID response," says Harry Chapin Chief Development Officer Barbara Evans. "As the safety net of our community, this funding helped ensure that no one had to go hungry in Collier County."

Meals of Hope President/CEO Stephen Popper continues to address the more than 100 percent increase in need, from 1,400 clients served by his organization's 14 pantries before the pandemic to a consistent 3,500 each month. With variants on the move and an ending to eviction moratoriums that have kept people in their homes, "we are gearing up for a busy fall," Popper says. "We are in for another uptick."

The pandemic "has shown even more so the importance of working in a collaborative manner," he adds. "We're only one cog in the wheel. The Community Foundation has done an excellent job at distributing federal dollars so we can purchase the goods [that are] so desperately needed."

Donald Pecora, donor relations and communications manager at Our Daily Bread, says his nonprofit relies not only on the Community Foundation's financial support but also on its leadership

## WE NEED YOUR HELP!

Though we don't have a crystal ball to see the next crisis, the community needs to be prepared when the next disaster strikes. That's why we created a \$2.5 million Crisis & Disaster Relief Fund as part of our **Your passion. Your Collier.** capital campaign. The fund is unrestricted, so we can

act at a moment's notice to sudden disasters that lead to mass job losses, shuttered businesses, medical-system strains, or mass casualties. Donate online at [cfcollier.org](http://cfcollier.org) or mail us a check using the enclosed envelope. Write "Crisis & Disaster Relief" in the memo line.

and knowledge. "Their experience, oversight, care, and support have been instrumental in our ability to meet the demands we have faced," he notes. "To put it simply, they have been role model 'hunger heroes' that we are proud to work together with to wipe out hunger."

Helping our local pantries alleviate food insecurity is not the only pandemic relief focus for the Community Foundation—but it is the highest amount granted in any category. "We stay on top of the critical needs of our community and act quickly so all areas of nonprofits can focus on those most in need," says CFCC President and CEO Eileen Connolly-Keesler. "It's what we do best."