It's About CommUNITY

The pandemic hit our communities with strong force and so many of our partner agencies are in high gear to serve families in need. St. Anne Community Outreach is one of our partners that offers food, clothing, rent, and utilities assistance. When the pandemic struck, they increased their food assistance services, with the help of the Coronavirus Relief Fund from the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley and the United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley.

Their first challenge was to engage new, younger volunteers who did not fall into the high risk categories. St. Anne Catholic Church has a private school from which they were able to recruit help from their students and teacher aides. And, people in the community embraced the challenge very quickly and they were ready to serve.

“We’ve been running a food pantry for the Coronavirus Emergency Response and we have been busy. We have seen more than 9,000 individuals since the beginning of March that have reached out for assistance with groceries. What’s amazing is normally we would be helping around 100 families a week, and during this time we are helping around 300-400 a week. In addition, about 64% of these families have never received assistance from us before. That’s pretty significant. We’ve had a lot of support from the community and people are so appreciative that they can keep food on their table for their families,” said Katie Byers, Executive Director of St. Anne Community Outreach, in late June.

Since mid-July, St. Anne Community Outreach operations have returned to their normal schedule of serving the community.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. In fact, it’s the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Meade
Our world changed in March 2020, and it was definitely a sign of a “new normal” when we saw more than 2,000 cars line up for our first Mobile Pantry food distribution on March 21. The impact of food insecurity in our 18 county service area already has us on our toes, but add the impact of a national health crisis, job losses, furloughs, business closures, and a full lockdown – the pandemic struck us with full force, and we quickly met the challenge.

The coronavirus is everywhere, touches anyone, and as we have all seen in the news stories, is putting a strain on food banks across the nation. We have had to re-imagine our food assistance programs to ensure our clients, volunteers, and our team members are safe; while at the same time, try to reach more families who desperately need our assistance.

Adding to our challenge, we just expanded into four new counties in Southwest Georgia to include Calhoun, Dougherty, Lee, and Terrell counties. Albany, Ga. (Dougherty County) was impacted by the virus and became a national news story for weeks as virus cases mounted and strained its healthcare system. Because this community has been through so many national disasters with recent hurricanes, it quickly mobilized and included our services in their relief efforts. We have found new partners and built new relationships, and they have embraced us as their community food bank.

All in all, we have expanded our Mobile Pantry Program to increase food distribution with the help of the Georgia National Guard. With the help of many of our Partner Agencies, we have worked with the school system in some of our counties to provide grab-and-go style meals during spring break, summer, and we will continue this through the school year to ensure children have meals after school. Our food distribution has increased by 53% during this time, and we are assisting people who have never needed the help of a food bank. We just closed out our fiscal year and distributed 13.6 million pounds of food to our 18 county service area. This is a 42% increase over the 2019-2020 fiscal year.

It has been a blessing to see a unity of purpose from so many of our partners. Collaboration has been wonderful as we all work together to put food on families’ tables.

We know that we live in a country with an abundance of available food, and there is no reason for anyone to ever be hungry. For a family facing serious hardships, having enough food to eat takes one burden off their shoulders and sends a message of hope.

This is our calling. This is our purpose. This is our ministry.

I want to recognize and thank our hard working, front line team at Feeding the Valley, our Partner Agencies, our many volunteers, and our generous donors and supporters who are all the wind beneath our wings as we navigate through these unprecedented times.

Sincerely,

Frank Sheppard
President & CEO
From the Front Lines

Highland Community Church
COLUMBUS, GA.

Allen stood in front of me crying as he hung his head and said, “Thank you for welcoming me.” He told us this was the first time he had ever stood in a line to receive food. A welder by trade for the last 20 years, he had always been able to provide for himself and his family. When he suddenly found himself without work due to COVID-19, everything was swept out from under his feet. As a church, we are grateful we are able to provide food for thousands of individuals over the last several months. We are especially grateful for the opportunity to welcome every person who, like Allen, needed a place to receive basic needs in a manner that was dignifying and uplifting.

Circles of Troup County
LAGRANGE, GA.

“I was working full-time as a single mom with two toddlers. When COVID-19 hit, my job was reduced from 40-plus hours to 8 hours a week. My childcare closed, so there was not opportunity for me to work more hours. I had some money in savings and was able to stay current with my bills, however, not enough to cover the cost of food. The Circles food donations filled my freezer with meat and my refrigerator with fruit and vegetables!”

YMCA
COLUMBUS, GA.

Our partnership with Feeding the Valley Food Bank grew stronger as our community faced the challenges of the pandemic. Unable to operate as a gym facility, we focused our efforts on caring for the children of first responders and essential hospital employees. Our days were long, 13 hour shifts, which required three meals and snacks to fuel our minds and body for positive daily interactions. Not only did Feeding the Valley step up to provide for our children, but with our own staffing shortages, we were sometimes without a driver to pick-up meals. They made sure a delivery driver was available so we were able to get food. Our Childcare Program never missed a meal or even had to worry about food being late, cold, or unhealthy. With proper nutrition and quality childcare, our hospital staff parents could be assured their children were well cared for.

Good Sam Ministry
LAGRANGE, GA.

“When the school system first closed due to COVID-19, I was worried about our families who depend on the weekly food bag they receive from Good Sam Ministry. For several weeks, I personally delivered food bags to those families at their homes. At this time, school buses were also going into neighborhoods to distribute breakfast and lunch to families. After spring break, the bus deliveries were discontinued and breakfast and lunch bags were distributed at local school sites. At this time, I began giving out the Good Sam food bags to families who came to the Hollis Hand pickup site instead of delivering to homes. Many parents who were not on my regular list to receive food bags requested one during this time. One parent expressed appreciation for the extra food as their work hours had been reduced during this time. I am extremely appreciative of the volunteers with Good Sam Ministry for making this resource available to families.”

– School Counselor, Hollis Hand Elementary
“Look for the helpers. You will always see people helping,” said Mr. Rogers.

We learned very quickly there are many “helpers” throughout our footprint and especially in Albany, Ga. After experiencing two tornadoes in 2017, Hurricane Irma in 2018, and a direct blow from Hurricane Michael in 2019, Albany, Ga. has seen disaster in action. Struck with some of the highest COVID-19 cases in the U.S. early in the pandemic, the “helpers” mobilized quickly and folded Feeding the Valley Food Bank into their relief efforts immediately.

One of those groups is the Boys & Girls Club of Albany. Under the leadership of Marvin B. Laster, CEO, and a wonderful staff, they rolled up their sleeves immediately to make sure families had food on their tables and children’s tummies and minds were still being nourished.

Delivering food boxes door to door in the neighborhoods they serve and assisting with our Mobile Pantry Program, they still have contact with the families they engage with. One family that needed a lot of help is a family of nine where Grandma is the guardian. With her children out of school and not able to go to the Club, where they would receive meals, providing food has been a strain on her family. Food provided by Feeding the Valley Food Bank and delivered by the Boys & Girls Club was a godsend and a relief for this family. Being able to help this family has been heartwarming and is just one small snapshot of the need throughout the 18 counties we serve.

“Faced with the challenge to find new ways to ensure that young people were safe, connected and engaged, we have had to re-imagine our programs. We are always trying to find solutions to meet the challenges of the families we serve. We began working with the Food Bank before they were even established in the community to bridge many gaps. COVID-19 has exposed our food deserts, our low literacy rates, lack of good healthcare, obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and lack of nutritious foods and transportation in southwest Georgia,” says Marvin B. Laster.

Our hope is that our relationship with the Boys & Girls Club of Albany will continue to flourish and align with their values to instill leadership and inspire young people to grow and become productive, responsible, and caring citizens.