

Hunger Watch

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
May 2020

Food distribution during the pandemic seems to be working -- for now

S



even weeks into the quarantine, hunger is settling in as an uninvited guest.

Most healthy people can do something to help, whether or not it means venturing out with masks and gloves. People over 65 with underlying conditions, concerned grown children, or both can make calls to check up on their neighbors and anyone in potential need. You can volunteer at a house of worship or food bank to prepare bags for distribution, or drop off food to shut-ins and talk through a door or window for some human connection.

With no money coming in to thousands of households, trips to Publix are tricky, and restaurant pickups and deliveries are dicey until better times come around. This reopening will be complicated and uneven.

All over the Biscayne Corridor and Southeast Florida, food distributions are nearly double year-ago levels. Altruism is in the air as much as worry and despair, in nearly all communities. North Miami Beach, for instance, has organized volunteers to deliver “stay put packs” of food and other essentials to shut-ins and people busy caregivers, in concert with the Joshua’s Heart Foundation.

First, a rant. True altruism and self-promotion do not co-exist. So why don’t we just cool it with

Hunger Watch

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
May 2020

those photo ops and gaudy credits for politicians on these food drives? If your cash-strapped city is buying food with municipal money this coming month, you should be placed before the dock. Publicity has its place. Just not here. End of rant.

As city coffers drain, the largesse for distributions will need to come less from their strained budgets than from private donations, federal and state revenue funds expressly set aside for food, and community and faith-based efforts.

The need is clearly vast. On April 3, three weeks into lockdown, the first car arrived at 5:30 a.m. for the City of North Miami's food distribution, scheduled for 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Some 600 bags were available at the site, at the city's police station. Mounted horse patrols and traffic cops were out to manage the clogged traffic that stretched along NE 125 Street a half mile to NE 12th Avenue and beyond, with plenty of cars still in line when the food ran out.

The city actually bought the food for that effort, but Mayor Philippe Bien-Aime says those days might be over. Like other cities, North Miami was transitioning to partnerships with groups like Feeding South Florida and Florida Farm Share, which provide food that cities help distribute.

Last year, Florida Farm Share distributed 88 million pounds of food around the state, more than 20 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables. It was established in 1991 with the mission that "no Floridian goes hungry and no food goes to waste."

Farm Share's executive director, Steve Shelley, says its supply is fine -- for now.

"From food supply purposes, we're okay," he says. "But there is more demand than there is food. We run out of food every time before the last car comes. April will be a record for us, with \$10 million. We're up at least 80 percent over normal operations."

Shelley adds: "Miami-Dade is our most active area in the state. It's the epicenter for the pandemic. It has a higher poverty rate, and things are feeling more frenzied here than in other parts of Florida."

Hunger Watch

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
May 2020

According to Shelley, real challenges loom. Florida Farm Share, which relies on government help, must scramble to make up for \$1.3 million in budget cuts from the state that take effect July 1. “Governments are losing money,” he says. “The question is, how are we going to feed people when the system can potentially break down? There is a potential catastrophe looming if it’s not managed properly.”

Volume is up dramatically, too, at Feeding South Florida, which distributed 62 million pounds last year to 706,000 people.

Feeding South Florida is part of Feeding America, one of America’s largest charities, with 200 food banks. On the very day of the North Miami food drive, billionaire Jeff Bezos announced a \$100 million contribution to Feeding America, and, later in the month, Publix unveiled its efforts to buy fresh milk and produce to donate directly to Feeding America’s food banks.

On the ground, institutions and individuals are learning new steps.

The Education Fund has planted food forests in 26 Miami-Dade schools, such as William Jennings Bryan Elementary on NE 125th Street. With schools closed, the group is reaping its edible harvests and distributing bags.

“Since coronavirus hit, we’ve distributed more than 600 bags of produce at different distribution sites,” says executive director Linda Lecht. “The busiest one has been at North Miami Senior High. We’ve been working with Empower Youth to teach kids in the juvenile justice system to cook for homeless families. If people are doing distribution and they need produce, they should call and partner with us.”

Program manager Debi LaBelle, a trained chef, has been distributing moringa, lemongrass, katuk, Okinawa spinach, cranberry spinach, and Barbados cherries so they don’t go to waste. Her colleague Eddie Recinos has been building a more virtual presence and YouTube platform for teachers and the wider public.

Hunger Watch

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
May 2020

“It doesn’t have to be a food forest,” he says. “It’s easy for people to create a small container garden.”

Sam Van Leer, who for 12 years with the Urban Paradise Guild has replaced invasive plants with natives in places such as North Miami’s ACE Nature Preserve, is pivoting to food, trying to bring “Victory Gardens” into Liberty City and other neighborhoods, so that apartment dwellers can have access to growing.

North Miami activist Laura Hill has worked with state Sen. Jason Pizzo to organize food banks, driving to Sam Accurso and Sons Farms in Homestead to buy produce at 20 cents on the dollar, marshalling volunteers, and driving back to distribute fresh food to neighbors and food pantries like Curley’s House in Liberty City.

“We can keep this going until we run out of food and volunteers,” Hill says.

Says Pastor Dennis Bartels of Holy Cross Lutheran Church at 760 NE 135 St.: “We serve meals every day and leave it for pickup at the sidewalk from 11:00 a.m. until it’s gone. We have volunteers who put on the masks and gloves, and leave food at the door for people who can’t get out, and wave to them and talk to them. It makes a huge difference.”

Says Hill: “People don’t necessarily like to ask for food. We just give out the food without judgment or expectation of praise. If people are hungry, they need to be fed.”

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com