“It was incredible how Second Harvest pivoted so quickly at such a chaotic time to get this food into the hands of those who needed it the most. We are so grateful for our partnership with Second Harvest!”

Mark Thompson
Sun Prairie Emergency Food Pantry
There have been many lessons learned as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, and its aftermath. For example, just when you think you have a plan in place to meet the need, reality jumps in to tell you what you thought was going to be enough, isn’t.

As with most businesses throughout the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed how Second Harvest and our network of emergency food providers meets the needs of those facing hunger. Gone are large gatherings of people for community meals, participants walking through pantry aisles choosing items for their family, and extra services like picking up program participants at home to bring them to the pantry. And, gone is the ability to rely on donated food, rather than purchased food, to meet the needs of those we serve.

Additionally, we’ve had to tell a very loyal group of volunteers - seniors 65 and older - that for their safety they should no longer come in to volunteer. This not only leaves us with a hole in our hearts, but the need to fill a huge hole in the critical workload that needs to get done, especially during this time of tremendous increase in need.

In early March we knew that as both an organization and a network we were going to have to step up to meet a spike in demand. Daily internal meetings, frequent communications with many of our partner agencies, and countless webinars and teleconference calls took place to share information, develop contingency plans, and implement strategies to make sure those in need were taken care of.

Based on the information we had at the time, we felt that 100,000 boxes of food would meet the need over the coming 6-8 weeks, at a cost of $1 million (largely driven by the need to purchase huge quantities of food and supplies, and increases in staffing costs to make up for the loss of volunteer time). Three weeks later we had already distributed more than 60,000 boxes of food to meet the rising need. The COVID-19 pandemic is clearly going to have a much longer impact, and require many more resources to be available for not only Second Harvest, but the entire network of emergency food providers.

There is good news! In this sea of turmoil, we must focus on positive outcomes rather than the circumstances surrounding the need. For example:

- In our very first partner agency box distribution, 400 boxes of food were provided to families with school-aged children in Sun Prairie - with just two days’ notice - to fill the void left by what should have been Spring Break in the school’s meal program.
- New partnerships were forged in the Wisconsin Dells community to address the food needs of 4,000 - 5,000 workers who were suddenly out of work when the hospitality industry collapsed.

Going forward, meeting the increase in need for an extended period of time will be a significant challenge, but one we are determined to meet with continued help from our supporters. Our ability to be flexible and agile in our response to this crisis has proven why we - along with our network of food pantries, meal sites, and shelters - are and will continue to be the leading hunger-relief providers in southwestern Wisconsin, thanks to supporters like you.

“We wouldn’t be able to continue our operations as a Food Pantry if it wasn’t for our partnership with Second Harvest. Not only did the staff respond immediately and responsively to the crisis and to agencies’ exceptional and quickly changing needs, they did so as collaborators in making sure that all of our operations were synchronized. We are grateful for their leadership!”

Ellen Carlson
Middleton Outreach Ministry
We Can Do This!

I’ve been in food banking for 20 years. We are a passionate and resilient network, a never-say-never bunch of doers. When people need food, we make sure they get it. Most times we do a lot with very little and we pride ourselves on getting things done no matter what it takes.

As a member of Feeding America, when a disaster strikes, we mobilize our network of sister food banks across the country to get resources to the food bank that needs it. But what happens when every food bank faces a disaster all at once? While we are built to take on a lot, the Coronavirus pandemic is like nothing we’ve ever seen. This is happening to every food bank around the country.

What’s happening is the “Corona Storm,” where multiple challenges hit at the same time. The quantity of donated food is down drastically. There is a surge in need. The cost of doing our work has risen sharply. We are purchasing exponentially more food to replace lost donations and fulfill new need. Food orders are delayed due to national demand. And we’ve hired more temporary staff to make sure the work gets done as we compensate for fewer volunteers.

It has been hard as the leader of a food bank to see a group of never-say-never people begin to doubt that we can pull this off. We fully believe in our mission and operate on a fair amount of faith that we can do our work in “normal” times, but these are not normal times. As the CEO, I’m seen as the one responsible for the mission, the budget, our impact in the community – but I’m really responsible for the success and well-being of the team who does the work. Our distribution center has an echo because we can’t keep it full. I see stress, uncertainty, and the fatigue of constant change on the faces of our team. They have always been essential in my eyes, but this is a new definition with new risks. I want to fix this and I can’t. We need to carry out our mission in a pandemic.

The community depends on us and this fact has helped us continue. If not us, then who? If we didn’t double our output overnight, and our donors didn’t help us cover those costs, how many people would not be getting a meal tonight? We might not be doing it all, but we are doing as much as possible and what is possible continues to grow every day thanks to the faith and the resources from individuals, families, businesses, and others. People are pulling together and it is helping us think about possibilities. We might not fully catch up to where we feel comfortable, but we are now taking things by weeks, not days. Soon it might be months. As long as every day gets better and we know that the community both depends on us and supports us, we can do this.

Our friends at Second Harvest really stepped up as the pandemic set in. Second Harvest supplied the St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry and other area pantries with thousands of pre-packed boxes of food that we were then able to provide to clients on a drive-through/curbside basis. That allowed us to adapt our model to serve more people even as we downsized our number of volunteers and socially distanced to help protect the health of all involved.

Ernie Stetenfeld
Society of St. Vincent de Paul – Madison
FIGHTING HUNGER A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY

During normal times Maddy Alsabbah, Liz Gerber, Molly Turner, and Keith Green would be feeding people by being a server, bartender, pastry chef, or an Executive Chef at some of Food Fight Restaurant Group’s finest restaurants. But these are not normal times!

Now, they’re ending hunger by temporarily joining the staff of Second Harvest Foodbank.

For many years Food Fight Restaurant Group has been a tremendous supporter of Second Harvest in a multitude of ways. From hosting fundraising dinners and offering special fundraising meals and cocktails, to being phone and sorting volunteers during the NBC15 Share Your Holidays Grand Finale, Food Fight and Second Harvest pair together as well as steak and potatoes, or bucatini and clams (depending on which Food Fight restaurant you’re dining in).

That’s why when Second Harvest badly needed temporary staff to help meet overwhelming demand during the Coronavirus pandemic, we reached out to Food Fight knowing how hard service workers were affected by pandemic-related closures.

As for Maddy, Liz, Molly, Keith and the other “Food Fighters” who are working for us, the choice was easy. Temporarily working at Second Harvest not only gives them a steady income while the economy rebounds, but it also gives them a chance to see another side of Second Harvest.

“I never knew where this food was going,” said Maddy. “Food is important, as long as we’re feeding people, that’s what matters. I have a higher appreciation for people at this job... I had no idea!”

In addition to helping in the warehouse, Liz also helps with our Mobile Pantry Program. “I see the people who come get the food as well. And a lot of them are people who had never been in this position before. They could be service industry workers, like us. If I didn’t have a job, that could be me.”

For pastry chef Molly, working at Second Harvest has kept her plans of building a new house alive. “I was in the process of building a house when I got the news that I was going to be laid off, and that was a major stressor. Being here has changed everything for me, and I hope that the work I’m doing here is changing everything for everybody else.”

And finally, Keith focused on the intrinsic value of working for Second Harvest. “As a Chef we pride ourselves on making good food and providing a good experience, that’s what we get joy in. Knowing that this food will be going to a family in need, you just can’t put a value on how good that makes you feel.”

As you can see, for these “Food Fighters” working at Second Harvest means so much more than just a paycheck!