FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Kate Maehr, Executive Director and CEO

PERSPECTIVE

The weekend before Thanksgiving, I visited a Greater Chicago Food Depository partner agency in Chicago’s Archer Heights neighborhood. The pantry, located in a church, is one of many agencies in the Food Depository’s network that distributes turkeys and other holiday food to hungry men, women and children in the community during November.

On that day, wet, heavy snow fell outside and clients waited inside the church – filling it to capacity. Below, in the church’s basement, volunteers were busy unboxing the turkeys and preparing bags of produce and shelf-stable groceries. It was humbling to see so many people working together toward a common goal – feeding the hungry. In a matter of hours that day, more than 1,100 households received turkeys, fresh fruit, vegetables and other groceries.

I wish I could say that this level of need was an exception. But, as we welcome the New Year, hunger remains prevalent in our community. Children, veterans and older adults continue to struggle despite a recovering economy. In 2015, Food Depository pantries served more than five million individuals, continuing a trend we’ve seen for the last six years.

But, we can make a difference. We have the incredible power to truly change the lives of the struggling individuals and families who live in our community. If we work towards a common goal – just as those volunteers did handing out turkeys – we can end hunger together.

Thank you for your continued support.

FIA CARES GREAT CHICAGO STEAK OUT RAISES MORE THAN $400,000

On November 5, members of the futures and options industry from the Futures Industry Association (FIA) once again came together to support the Greater Chicago Food Depository at the FIA Cares Great Chicago Steak Out. This year’s event collected more than $400,000. Since 2008, FIA Cares has raised more than $2.7 million to help fight hunger in our community.

This year’s Platinum Sponsors were The Clearing Corporation Charitable Funds, CME Group and FIA. This year’s Gold Sponsors were ABN AMRO Clearing Chicago LLC, Eagle Seven, LLP, IMC Charitable Foundation – Financial Markets, Intercontinental Exchange, Societe Generale and TD Ameritrade, Inc.
Most years, November and December bring Chicago’s first blast of cold and snow. Chicagoans break out the shovels, tune up snow blowers and hunker down for another long winter.

This year was different. According to the Illinois State Climatologist Office, December was the state’s warmest on record, boasting an average temperature of nearly 41 degrees. As the weather turns colder, hungry individuals and families in our community often make difficult decisions between paying for utilities like heat and paying for food. Wouldn’t it follow, then, that those decisions would be easier this year since it has been so mild?

Not necessarily. Just ask Pat Dorotika, who receives food from the Together We Cope food pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository partner agency in Tinley Park.

“The weather is still cold, no matter what you say,” she said, as she waited for food recently.

Pat has been coming to the pantry for about a year. She works as a caregiver 40 hours per week, but still struggles to make enough to support herself and her disabled son.

A mild winter hasn’t provided her with much of a respite from elevated utility bills.

“I’m still turning on my furnace,” she said. “I always have to make the decisions between utilities and food. All the time.”

While the winter can be more challenging, Pat makes similar decisions year-round.

“There are bills I know I just can’t pay every month,” she said. “There are certain months when I just won’t pay because I can’t afford it.”

Pat is not alone. According to the Hunger in America study, 73 percent of Food Depository clients choose between paying for food and paying their utility bills.

But, those decisions are made easier for Pat because of the food she receives at the pantry.

“When I started coming here, we had no food in our house. Zero. Nothing in our pantry,” she said. “Now that we’ve been coming, things have gotten better. We have food in the house again.”
A healthy commitment

The inside story of the Food Depository’s continued dedication to distributing produce

It’s a foggy, wet Friday morning in early January as a green Greater Chicago Food Depository truck rumbles north on the Stevenson Expressway. Food Depository driver Joel Ortiz is behind the wheel of the 53-foot tractor-trailer, which is making its twice-weekly trip to the International Produce Market off Damen Avenue.

“This is what it’s all about,” he says. “This is the first step in getting produce out to people in need.”

At the Market, a wholesale produce facility, distributors donate excess fresh fruit and vegetables to the Food Depository. On any given day, Joelle might return with a full load of cabbages, bananas, pears, avocados and more.

The produce the Food Depository receives at the Market is just one example of a continuing commitment to distributing fresh fruit and vegetables to hungry people in our community – a commitment that actually began at Chicago’s former Produce Market, the South Water Market, in 1979.

That year, the late Bob Strube Sr. and five others founded the Food Depository. The organization’s first location was in a stall donated by Strube at the South Water Market, which still donates produce.

“We continue to honor my grandfather’s legacy,” said T.J. Fleming, director of sales at Strube. “It’s something to be proud of. Everyone should have access to fresh produce.”

Since 1979, that commitment to produce has grown. Last year, the Food Depository distributed 68 million pounds of food. Thirty-five percent of that – nearly 24 million pounds – was fresh fruit and vegetables.

Ultimately, the Food Depository’s goal is to make sure produce gets from the warehouse to the homes of hungry men, women and children quickly and efficiently. That process is often more complex than a short drive down the Stevenson to the International Produce Market. But, for hungry individuals and families in our community, it’s always worth it.

Pears from Washington, oranges from Texas: Sourcing produce

On an average day, the Food Depository distributes nearly 1,700 cases – or about 50,000 pounds – of fresh produce.

At the same time, the Food Resources team is busy purchasing produce from all over the country. In fact, it’s not uncommon to see shipments of apples from Michigan, potatoes from Minnesota, cabbage from Georgia, pears from Washington or oranges from Texas coming through the facility each week.

“One of the biggest challenges with produce is that it’s so perishable,” said Sheila Creghin, Food Depository vice president of operations. “It has to be managed closely in terms of getting it in and getting it out.”

From the time it arrives at the Food Depository, it usually takes just a few days to get that product out into the community. Volunteers are a large part of that quick turnaround time. Practically every day, they help sort and repackage fresh fruit and vegetables. That effort translates to a wide variety of produce being available to Food Depository partner agencies. Generally, agencies choose from as many as 10 types of produce per order.

But, why go to so much trouble to ensure hungry people have produce?

An apple a day...

“Research shows fresh produce is critical to disease prevention and management,” said Dr. Angela Odoms-Young, an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Food Depository board member. “Unfortunately, low-income Americans are more at risk for diets that lack produce.”

The health benefits of regularly eating fresh fruit and vegetables are immense. For children especially, consistent access to produce is crucial for proper development.

“Fruit and vegetables help create healthier kids,” Dr. Odoms-Young said. “They help reduce obesity, improve digestive health and in the long-term, can reduce the risk of some types of cancers.”

Access to fresh produce is an important part of the intersection between health and hunger. Unfortunately, struggling families often can’t afford produce, or live in areas without consistent access to it. In turn, their health can suffer. According to the Hunger in America study, 44 percent of clients surveyed reported being in fair or poor health.
That’s why the Food Depository has partnered with the Cook County Health and Hospitals System (CCHHS) and ACCESS Community Health Network to offer food insecurity screenings to patients in clinics throughout the community. Those who screen positive are referred to the Food Depository’s Fresh Truck, which distributes fresh produce at CCHHS and ACCESS clinics.

The end result: Creating a healthier, stronger community

After produce has been purchased or donated, after it’s been inspected and packaged by volunteers, it heads out into the community. And that’s when it makes an impact.

For people like Sue Lessner, fresh produce is a luxury. After losing a job about a year and a half ago, her family doesn’t have the money to regularly afford fruit and vegetables. Her husband works full-time, but his job still doesn’t pay enough to make produce a regular option at the grocery store.

“I hardly ever purchase produce,” she explains. “It’s just too expensive.”

But, Sue receives the produce she needs at the Rich Township Producemobile each month, where she also volunteers.

“This helps a lot,” she said. “We still struggle but at least we have the fresh food we need.”

Sue is now working about 10 hours a week and is trying to get back on her feet. In the meantime, she knows that there’s another important benefit to the produce she receives.

“It keeps my husband and me healthy.”

Also at the Producemobile, Darlene is waiting to receive her cabbages, apples, pears, onions, potatoes and more. She started coming to the distribution after going on medical leave from her job for eight months while recovering from foot surgery.

“Even working people need help sometimes,” she said. “This has helped me a lot while I’ve been on disability.”

Darlene and Sue are just two of the nearly 350 families per month the Rich Township Producemobile serves. Overall, the Producemobile makes nearly 50 stops monthly throughout the county. But, it is not the only way the Food Depository distributes fresh fruit and vegetables. Each day, food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters distribute produce from the Food Depository to their clients.

A growing future

So, what are the Food Depository’s future produce plans?

“From the very beginning, in that stall at the South Water Market, the Food Depository has been indelibly linked to produce,” said Kate Maehr, Food Depository executive director and CEO. “Over the next few years, we intend to continue strengthening our commitment to providing hungry people in our community with fresh fruit and vegetables.”

That will be made easier by the recent passage of tax legislation which makes food donation tax incentives for farmers permanent. The Food Depository expects this to increase produce donations. By the end of 2018, the Food Depository expects 40 percent of distributed food to be produce.

“Distributing produce is our imperative,” Kate said. “It makes people healthier. It makes our community stronger.”
Food Depository, County unveil Food Access Plan

A two-year plan led by the Greater Chicago Food Depository and Cook County aims to strengthen the response to food insecurity and increase access to nutritious food in the county’s suburbs.

The Cook County Food Access Plan was unveiled in early January.

“The Plan provides a roadmap to increase the availability of nutritious food for people in need,” said Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.

It focuses on three goals: expanding food insecurity screenings at county health clinics, creating a work group to increase student access and participation in suburban school meal programs, and growing the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and incentive programs at county farmers markets.

“Hunger is a solvable problem, but it does require work and collaboration. Together, we want to make sure everyone in our community has access to quality nutrition and healthy food so they can live healthy lives,” said Kate Maehr, Food Depository executive director and CEO.

To read the full Plan, visit chicagosfoodbank.org.

For Nico Cordumi, a Greater Chicago Food Depository associate board member and Chicago-based brand specialist at Google, giving to the Food Depository makes sense, and Google makes it easy.

“Food is such a basic need, yet people are still hungry in our community,” he said.

That’s because Google encourages its employees to support charities with its GooglersGive Gift Match program, which matches any individual’s donation, up to $6,000 per year.

“Not only does Google promote a culture where giving back is a priority, they put it in the hands of employees. Everyone gets excited about it,” Nico said.

Google also incentivizes volunteering by donating $10 for each hour an employee volunteers at an organization. Since 2006, Google workplace and corporate matching gifts have accounted for $43,000 in donations to the Food Depository, including more than $2,600 in food drives. Since 2010, over 100 Google employees have volunteered more than 500 hours.

Additionally, in early December, Google hosts Giving Week. The annual event features a different charity each day chosen by employees. Donations to the charity are matched once by Google and once by an employee, tripling the impact of the initial gift.

“We’re citizens of this community too,” Nico said. “We want to give back and make it a better place.”

To learn about ways your company can give back to the Food Depository, contact Kelly Klein at 773-843-7782 or kklein@gcfd.org.
ILLINOIS LAW EXPANDING ACCESS TO SNAP TAKES EFFECT

Many low-income working families in Illinois now have access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, thanks to a law that went into effect January 1.

Senate Bill 1847 increases the SNAP income limit from 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 165 percent of FPL. The expanded limit provides access to SNAP for families that were making slightly too much to qualify for the program but still struggling. It is estimated that the new law will enable 40,000 previously ineligible families to receive SNAP benefits.

Food Depository volunteers and partner agencies encouraged lawmakers to support the bill during Lobby Day in Springfield last May. It passed through the General Assembly last spring with bipartisan support and was signed in July.

1 CITY, 1 FOOD DRIVE EFFORTS COLLECTS MORE THAN 1 MILLION MEALS

Throughout the holiday season, more than 500 food drives collected shelf-stable groceries throughout our community during the annual 1 City, 1 Food Drive effort. This year’s campaign collected enough food and funds for more than one million meals.

Some of the 2015 highlights included the Union Station food drive, which collected nearly 15,000 pounds of food in less than 24 hours, an expanded WGN TV “Drive-Thru” food drive the day before Thanksgiving and the Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA) of Chicago’s food drive, which collects food from downtown office buildings.

Thank you to everyone who organized or participated in a food drive during the holiday season!
CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Feb. 28 – March 1
National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference.
Washington, D.C.

March 6
CHIditarod XI.
1900 W. Hubbard.

March 10
28th Annual Chicago Commercial Real Estate Awards Dinner.
Hyatt Regency Chicago.

March 25
Good Friday.
Food Depository closed.

April 8
Chicago’s Community Kitchens graduation.
Food Depository.

April 10-16
National Volunteer Week.

April 30 – May 1
Baconfest Chicago.
UIC Forum.

May 10-11
Hunger Summit and Lobby Day.
Springfield, IL

June 25
31st Annual Hunger Walk.
Jackson Park.

Become a Partner for All Seasons

Every day, regardless of season, hunger exists in our community. The Food Depository makes a daily impact on hunger and distributed 68 million pounds of food last year. By becoming a Partner for All Seasons, your monthly gifts ensure that nutritious food is available for our hungry neighbors all year long. To learn more, visit chicagosfoodbank.org/monthlygiving.