

A note from Beth Ely, one of our Coalition Lay Leaders

As Covid-19 spread within the US, I received two unsettling emails within a few minutes of each other. The church campus was closing and the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida was suspending all volunteer activities. How was the Coalition going to keep the 500 children, women, and family fed without the two volunteer groups they counted on every day for their Center for Women and Families (CWF) and Men's Service Center (MSC) shelters?

To replace our monthly fresh cooked meal, church Missions would pay for a pre-made meal like frozen lasagna and salad mix. However, with supplies in stores being depleted, where could food for 200 be found? I was ready to admit defeat and recommend that Missions just donate to the shelter budget.

Then, I set out to get BOGO dog food at Publix and came across frozen turkey breast on sale for \$1 per pound. As I stared at my find, the Missions team was literally meeting, with one topic being the donation for the Coalition dinner. I hadn't yet been given the allotted budget, but after also finding BOGO smoked sausage, small red beans, and large bags of rice at Publix the ingredients for jambalaya were staring at me and I couldn't walk away.

Across the street to another Publix and I had enough of the basic ingredients to feed all 500 shelter guests so that the Coalition could prepare just one meal for both shelters since they would be operating without most of their kitchen workers - the volunteers. After trips to two Sam's Clubs, I had the rest of jambalaya ingredients - tomatoes, onions, cooking oil, seasoning - and individually wrapped Rice Krispie treats for dessert.

The shelter kitchen staff was thrilled with the ingredients for a meal given the overnight complete disruption to their normal operation. And, I could sleep better after several restless nights of worrying about how the shelter was going to provide for those in our community that need our support.

A few days later church Missions notified me of a restaurant with perishable food they wanted to donate since their business would be closed indefinitely. A quick phone call to one of our shelter volunteers who happened to be near the restaurant and an hour later we had another car of food to the shelter. The kitchen staff was thrilled to get such "unusual" items as cabbage, asparagus, and, most amazingly, broccoli with butter already in the bag for cooking and seasoning.

The next day I received another awesome phone call - someone wanted to donate fresh produce. After making connections the "someone" was the major produce wholesaler in Central Florida. Within two hours, three of us were at the FreshPoint warehouse picking up the first donation order for the Coalition. By the end of the week, five agencies that serve our community with shelters or pantries received close to a semi-trailer of produce with the help of FreshPoint, their delivery drivers, our volunteer pickup team, and the agencies themselves that were so excited they wanted to pick up the donations themselves to more quickly get the food to those in need.

The variety, quantity, and quality of food was greeted with amazement by the agencies and those that they serve. Produce beyond the basics of apples, bananas, oranges, lettuce, or potatoes that we may take for granted are luxuries for many others.

In this time of uncertainty, the everyday stresses of the disadvantaged in our community are amplified. I am grateful for the individuals, businesses, and organizations in community that are reaching out to help them during this crisis.

Kind regards,
Beth