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Helping feed NJ's hungry during the current crisis

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&NBSP;BORDENTOWN, NJ —

If this story were written as recently as a couple of months ago, no one would have believed it. Our nation was enjoying a historic economy, and unemployment was close to record lows.

Then, out of nowhere, a virus turned our world upside down. The American Dream quickly devolved into a terrible nightmare. This land of plenty became a land of want. Most of us living have never witnessed this current level of economic disaster that most experts say rivals the Great Depression.

With so many families out of work, going without food has become a real concern. For many without income and depleted savings, a trip to the grocery store is not an option. Community food banks across the country are experiencing record demand, and resources are at a breaking point. Compounding this problem, the virus has necessitated closure of many feeding locations.

The New Jersey Agricultural Society's Farmers Against Hunger Program, which began in 1996, was initially launched to enable farmers throughout New Jersey to contribute their extra produce to those in need. Prior to the development of Farmers Against Hunger, a few farmers tried to donate produce to their local food bank or food pantries, but transportation was always a problem. When farmers are in the midst of growing and harvesting, there is little time for employees to truck produce to a non-paying destination. And, for the most part, the food banks or pantries did not have vans, trucks or drivers to go and get the produce at a moment's notice.

What initially began as a transportation project grew to include volunteer gleanings at participating New Jersey farms, retail food donations and nutrition programs aimed towards at-risk populations. During a normal week, the program feeds approximately 7,000 New Jersey citizens. Farmers Against Hunger's operations are funded solely through grants, donations and fundraisers.

As need throughout the Garden State has reached crisis levels, the Farmer Against Hunger's staff, consisting of just five people, have worked tirelessly to help feed New Jersey's hungry. The program has harnessed the generosity of New Jersey's farmers, produce wholesalers, retailers, processors, volunteers and other feeding organizations to organize special food distribution days at sites throughout the state.

It was noon on Friday, May 8, and hundreds of cars were already lined up for a food distribution scheduled to begin at 1 p.m. The cold drizzle matched the somber mood of those anxiously waiting for food. Farmers Against Hunger staff and volunteers had arrived hours before and were assembling boxes filled with potatoes, carrots, broccoli, lettuce, oranges, bananas, blueberries and other produce items that were donated. Another feeding organization assembled boxes that contained staples such as canned goods, bread and cheese, designed to feed a family for a week.

As the line began to move, volunteers from both organizations operated at assembly-line efficiency. Vehicles would pull up to the loading spot, and the driver was asked to open the trunk. Within seconds the boxes of food were placed inside, the trunk secured and the driver on the way.

It was striking to see how this national tragedy has affected a spectrum of social and economic levels. High-end SUVs and other luxury cars were in abundance. Minivans that normally would be taking children to soccer practice sat alongside commercial pickup trucks advertising a business that most likely has been suspended.

For many in line this was a new experience, one that until recently was probably never remotely imagined. Most looked straight ahead, avoiding eye contact, clearly embarrassed at their new situation in life and probably thankful that the mandatory mask helped hide their identity.

Several hours later the last box was distributed. The food was all gone. The line of vehicles still stretched for hundreds of yards. Now the volunteers had the grim task to walk the line and tell everyone who remained that there was no more food. It was heartbreaking to witness the quiet desperation of those who would go without, not knowing what else to do. As the crowd of vehicles dissipated, Farmers Against Hunger was already working with other feeding organizations to plan the next distribution.

Al Murray is executive director of the New Jersey Agricultural Society.

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