



Pastor Rubi Pimentel of Hendersonville Spanish Church unloads produce from a local farm to feed community members in need. Photo by Colby Rabon

Food insecurity in Western North Carolina has nearly tripled during the COVID-19 pandemic as people struggle to put food on the table.

“While we are deeply concerned that our partners are reporting the highest number of individuals coming to their pantries yet (as of October, over 103,000 people a month, a 77 percent increase over pre-pandemic averages), we also know that we have been able to be there with food for these families only through the support of our incredible, generous community,” MANNA Food Bank stated in a recent newsletter.

Indeed, the network of churches, community organizations and food pantries across the region have partnered, pivoted and come up with new programs to meet the growing need.

The Giving Spoon, a fairly new food nonprofit serving Swain County, has gone from serving one hot meal a week at Bryson City Presbyterian Church to providing two hot meals a week through a pick-up service plus expanding its delivery program.

“We’re seeing three times as many people as we saw before COVID-19,” said Kathleen Burns with The Giving Spoon. “We’ve gone from serving 100 meals one night a week to an average of 300 to 350 meals two nights a week. And the demographic is different, especially when (COVID) first started — we’re seeing families with children or families that ... I don’t know how to say it, but these are not families that you’d think would be in our food line.”

It’s no longer those who are unsheltered or the elderly who need a meal once a week — it’s people who are now unemployed or underemployed due to the pandemic or people who’ve had to leave their job to stay at home with their children. It’s younger families who are having a hard time paying all their bills right now.

“Initially, we saw a 30 percent uptick in demand and then over the summer things slowed down a little bit when some places were opening back up. But now we’ve seen the numbers climb again for the last two months so we’re back at a 30 percent increase and rising,” said Paige Christie, director of The Community Table in Sylva. “We’ve had several hundred families come to us that have never come to us before. The demographics have changed from just the elderly to young working families with children. Some folks need us once and some folks need us every couple of weeks.”

Before the pandemic, The Community Table served two sit-down meals a week and offered food boxes to send home with families from the food pantry. The organization hasn’t been able to hold a sit-down meal since March 24 and is now only doing to-go pre-packaged meals on a drive-thru basis four days a week. Food boxes used to be distributed once every two weeks, but during the height of the pandemic, Community Table was distributing them once a week.

Christie said the nonprofit has managed to keep things going thanks to community donations and a number of grants, specifically grants from the Highlands-Cashiers Health Foundation and ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project). The health foundation grant provided funding for Community Table to purchase food packing equipment and the ASAP grant subsidized the cost of buying fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers needing somewhere to move their produce during the pandemic.

“We’re trying to spend our money on food in such a way, in strategic places to keep it in the community and keep our farmers and local grocers working,” she said. “The ASAP grant has worked out great and now we’ve established relationships with farmers markets and other farms so that we’re able to at least help get them through the winter and hopefully into the spring.”

Even before the pandemic, Burns said she knew there had to be more than 100 people a week needing a meal, which is what spurred the idea of expanding the delivery services. Giving Spoon utilizes volunteers to deliver meals out into the community.

“A lot of people don’t have transportation or gas money to get to us at the church, so now we go as far as Alarka and as far as Highway 19 on the Jackson County line,” she said.

Giving Spoon has also benefited from the generosity of several grant giving programs during the pandemic,

including ASAP.

“We’ve loved the ASAP program that’s partnered us with Darnell Farms to get lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. I’m hoping that’s going to be available next year as well,” Burns said.

Even with the COVID-19 vaccine rolling out now to the most vulnerable populations in the U.S., Burns and Christie don’t see the food insecurity problems going away anytime soon.

“Unfortunately, it’s going to get worse. We’re not going back to eating inside any time soon, so we’ll continue with our efforts for pick-up,” she said. “A lot of people will still be out of work and people will continue to have a number of health concerns. People are suffering more from depression, anxiety and stress, and people are fearful during this uncertain time.”



*Don Carringer with Carringer Farms in Franklin is just one farm that is supplying local food pantries with fresh fruits and vegetables thanks to funding from ASAP. Donated photo*

Christie said she's thankful WNC communities had time to prepare for the pandemic since cases didn't begin to show up here until late March. That time gave organizations across the region time to make changes and plans for the future. However, she sees the need for additional food resources continuing far into the next year.

"It definitely doesn't feel like things are getting better here — several of our counties are now into the red with cases so this thing isn't going away any time soon," she said. "Even with the vaccine we're not looking at everyday people having access to that until maybe the summer. I think we're in this for the long."

In the meantime, Christie said organizations like Community Table would continue to evaluate its systems and look for ways to better serve people in need. She said all the food pantries across the region are in constant communication with each other and MANNA to ensure food is going to where it's needed.

In the last eight months, MANNA has provided food for an average of 103,000 people each month. This is an increase of over 77 percent compared to our pre-pandemic numbers. It has distributed 17.5 million pounds of food since March, a 35 percent increase of the total pounds of food distributed over the same time period last year.

In the 2019-2020 fiscal year, MCMs distributed over 800,000 pounds of food across Western North Carolina. Since July of this year alone, they have distributed over 450,000 pounds into neighborhoods with a high need for food.

MANNA also launched MANNA Community Market (MCM) last year, which enables the nonprofit to host pop-up markets across WNC. Within the first few months, MCMs had become visible in every county, while solidly establishing itself as a regular routine destination in eight counties.

"One of the greatest successes of the MCM program has been that the distributions have filled the gap where there weren't any partner agencies," said Malarie McGalliard, MANNA's mobile programs coordinator. "A lot of people who were not able to find food assistance, can now rely upon MCMs to be there for them and their families."

One problem MANNA has had during the pandemic is distributing fresh food quickly enough, which is why the ASAP program has been so helpful in more rural communities.

Sara Hart, communications coordinator for ASAP, said the program's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters and build healthy communities through connections to local food. That mission has been even more critical as farmers try to navigate the pandemic. March and April were a scary time for farmers — planting was already underway and the restaurants they rely on to buy their produce were having to shut down.

"Going into 2020, a lot of ASAP's work was in experiential education in the classrooms, and that wasn't going to be happening so we've done a lot of pivoting with programs and getting grant money to help farmers start selling online and reaching customers in new ways," she said. "We're also trying to offer lots of support for farmers markets to operate as safely as possible."

Keeping the farmers markets open and safe were important so that farmers would continue to have that outlet to move their harvest and stay operational, but still more needed to be done, Hart said. ASAP needed to find a way

to rematch the supply and demand to keep farmers getting paid while also trying to keep communities fed. A \$275,000 grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina helped ASAP start a new program.

“Our Appalachian Farms Feeding Families program came out of that. In working with MANNA, we realized they have a large distribution network in the region but food distribution in small communities wasn’t getting there quickly enough for them to get fresh foods,” Hart said. “We realized the need to do what MANNA does but on a micro level.”

ASAP stepped in to match local farms with local feeding sites like Haywood Christian Ministries, Community Kitchen, Community Table, The Giving Spoon and others so fresh foods could get into the hands of families sooner. ASAP funding helped subsidize the cost of the food so farmers could still get paid.

With the help of individual donations and hopefully future grants, ASAP hopes to keep the Farms Feeding Families program going into next spring. When asked in March how they feared the pandemic would impact their business, many farmers feared they’d go bankrupt or would lose their home and/or farm. However, thanks to huge shifts in distributing their food, Hart said they haven’t seen a large number of farm closures at the end of 2020, but the industry is not in the clear moving into 2021.

“We’re kind of still in a wait and see where the world goes scenario,” she said. “There hasn’t been a huge number of closures like we’ve seen with restaurants, but some might decide to get out of the business next year.”