Local food banks meet higher need

by Rachel Fixsen Moab Sun News
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The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on the economy and the effects are felt most acutely by those who were already struggling financially.

Moab residents are relying on area food banks in greater numbers, a rise in demand that mirrors trends across the country and state. With higher demand already stressing local resources, care organizations are concerned about what will happen when enhanced unemployment benefits authorized by the federal CARES act run out at the end of July and put still more people in need of aid.

“Our town is not where it was last July,” said Rhiana Medina, director of the Moab Valley Multicultural Center, referring to the depressed economy.

The multicultural center offers social services like ID renewals, referrals to workforce services, accepting mail for those without addresses, and distributing aid vouchers or gift cards for City Market. The organization also operates a pantry stocked by community donations, part of a network of local food pantries that has seen dramatic impacts from the pandemic.

In 2019, the Center distributed 284 meals in April; in 2020, the number was 3,421, about 12 times more than the previous year. April was a peak month for unemployment in Grand County and the peak month for demand on food banks locally. In the following months, numbers have stayed much higher than the previous year.

Though requests for food have dropped from their peak in April, the need is still significant.

“We’re still giving out food every day,” said Liz Donkersloot, housing resource coordinator for the Multicultural Center.
She said the organization is always open to financial or food donations from the community, especially of fresh produce.

Medina noted that even though people are returning to their jobs and businesses have reopened, the local economy is still far from recovered and reported that the Center is seeing more people in need of help obtaining basics like shelter and food.

“There’s a lot of uncertainty right now,” she said.

Affordable housing and living wages are a chronic problem in the Moab area.

The stress on local resources has been felt across the state. In April, the nonprofit Utahns Against Hunger conducted a survey of 77 emergency food pantries statewide to try to gauge the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

Food pantries reported that they were able to respond quickly to community needs, but the organizations needed more dedicated staff and volunteers and consistent donations, especially of money and perishable food products, to sustain the ongoing need exacerbated by the pandemic.

St. Francis Episcopal Church in Moab partners with the Utah Food Bank to run a local pantry. They too saw increased demand for food assistance this spring.

“We were running pretty low,” said Yvonne Bliss, who helps to run the pantry and weekly free community meal at St. Francis.

She said the church saw a surge in requests for food assistance during March and April, describing lines of dozens of cars waiting to pick up supplies. The church’s food inventory started to dwindle. Usually, St. Francis has excess to share with other local pantries; they had to put those partnerships on hold for several weeks.

Bliss said the pace at the pantry has since slowed down again, and inventory is back up.

“You can tell when people start to go back to work,” Bliss said. “It’s slowed down. We’re still busy, but not like that.”
She added that even people who do hold steady employment often come to the pantry to supplement their regular grocery shopping, which she says is due to Moab’s high cost of living.

**Hunger among children and students**

When school buildings were closed to students this spring, school district staff reformatted the US Department of Agriculture-sponsored free and reduced lunch program to make sure students continued to get proper nutrition, bagging and delivering meals that students usually would receive at school.

When the academic year ended, meal delivery ended too, but the school district also administers a USDA-sponsored summer meal program which usually serves in-person lunch to kids up to age 18. Alysha Packard, director of Child Nutrition Programs for Grand County School District, said the program served 8,000 meals this June, compared to 1,000 meals in June of 2019. The program ended on June 30.

While the 2020 USDA-funded summer lunch program has ended for the year, there is another free lunch option available for Grand County youth.

The Kids’ Cafe is an ongoing statewide program sponsored by the Utah Food Bank to provide meals for youth up to age 18. In Grand County, the program is administered through the Grand County Library in Moab. While the library has been a Kids Cafe location since the summer of 2019, precautions related to the pandemic have changed the way it works.

“It’s radically different now than it has been in the past,” said library Director Carrie Valdes.

Strict rules from the Utah Food Bank used to dictate that students receive meals in person. With indoor gathering now a public health risk, a family member can pick up five sack lunches a week for each child in the household, using the same curbside pick-up method the library has been using to check out books.

**Statewide trends**

Ginette Bott is the President and CEO of the Utah Food Bank. She said that from her organization’s perspective, Grand County is one of the less-impacted areas statewide. Washington and San Juan counties, and communities along the Wasatch Front, have seen the biggest increase in need, she said.
Utah Food Bank deliveries to Grand County this spring were not drastically higher than last year. From March 1 to July 6 of 2019, the Utah Food Bank delivered 69,094 pounds of food to the Grand County Food Bank and St. Francis Episcopal Church. During the same stretch of time this year, they delivered 74,825, Bott said.

She noted, however, that each food pantry is an independent entity and the state organization doesn’t track donations from other sources, such as community contributions. She also pointed out that not all food pantries are associated with the statewide food bank, and people are likely to use pantries with the most convenient hours. The Grand County Food Bank is open just four hours a week.

Bott said that she and other food assistance providers know that coronavirus impacts are ongoing.

“We prepare for an 18-month window,” she said. “We’re talking to pantries all the time about looking to the future, recognizing the impacts.”

Requests for meals skyrocket compared to last year

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– Rhiana Medina