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Coronavirus Florida: As demand for services rises, local nonprofits alter operations, fund-raising strategies

By Jodie Wagner

In the weeks, months and years before the novel coronavirus pandemic substantially altered American life, Feed the Hungry Pantry supplied healthy food to thousands of hungry families through food deliveries and pickup stations.

Last year alone, the West Palm Beach-based nonprofit organization provided nearly 3 million pounds of food to those who needed it, including 3,000 families per month and more than 6,400 families at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"We give families 100-plus pounds of meat, fish, vegetables, fruit, milk, eggs, bread and canned goods monthly," said Dan Shorter, who along with his wife, Jacquie, founded Feed the Hungry Pantry in 1987. "One advantage we have is four refrigerated trucks and one refrigerated van that are constantly collecting food."

The trucks and van remain, but food is becoming harder to gather in the midst of a pandemic that has shuttered businesses and thrown thousands of local workers into unemployment.

Feed the Hungry Pantry is one of numerous local nonprofits that have had to adjust to this changing landscape, both in the way they operate and how they raise money.

In an effort to provide food safely through pickup lines - even as donations dwindle and need increases - Feed the Hungry is telling families to keep their windows rolled up and clean out their trunks so food can be placed there.

For deliveries, its volunteers make sure someone is home before leaving food outside the door.

If recipients can't lift the food packages, volunteers ask that they go in another room before placing the food on a table or counter.

"We wear gloves and wash our hands a lot," Shorter said.

Shorter expects more than 1,000 new families will require food donations through Feed the Hungry Pantry during the next couple of weeks as the coronavirus crisis deepens, and is working to secure it despite reduced donations from grocery stores and other local businesses.

The nonprofit Palm Beach County Food Bank also is working to provide food to those who need it despite dwindling donations from corporations, partner agencies, restaurants, farmers and supermarkets.

Many of those resources have closed their doors, or simply don't have any food left to share with the Food Bank, executive director Karen Erren said.

The Food Bank is now reaching out to the public for help.

"Palm Beach County is a generous, caring community at all times, and specifically in times of crisis, which this certainly is," Erren said. "The greatest help to us right now is a financial contribution, which give us agility to respond to rapidly changing circumstances."

Many other local nonprofits are raising money to feed the county's growing number of hungry families during the coronavirus crisis, including the Arc of Palm Beach County and Meals on Wheels of the Palm Beaches.

The Arc, a Riviera Beach-based nonprofit that helps empower children and adults with disabilities, has created a food pantry to assist those with family members who are both medically fragile and have a disability.

"With many of the programs that normally serve this population temporarily suspended due to the pandemic, families are facing tough daily decisions," said Kimberly McCarten, president and CEO of The Arc of Palm Beach County. "Combine that pressure with the economic hit everyone is facing today, and the desperation is palpable."

"This small gesture of providing a food pantry goes a long way to help families cope in a dire situation."

West Palm Beach-based Meals on Wheels of the Palm Beaches, which delivers meals to homebound seniors from Jupiter to Lantana, also is committed to helping some of the county's most vulnerable residents.

The organization normally serves about 250 seniors five days a week, offering freshly made noontime meals that are delivered by volunteers.

But in an effort to ensure safety for everyone providing or receiving services, the organization now is providing seven days' worth of frozen meals once a week until further notice, said Pam Calzadilla, President and CEO of Meals on Wheels of the Palm Beaches.

Volunteers no longer are knocking on doors to physically check on clients, but are calling instead.

"The health and safety of our clients, volunteers and staff continues to be our number one priority," Calzadilla said. "As a result, we have shifted to a staff-only meal preparation and delivery model. We are delivering more than 2,000 meals each week while ensuring there is no physical contact between staff and clients."

While many local nonprofits are focusing on food, others zero in on stabilizing the lives of children and those battling illness and disability.

Place of Hope, a faith-based, family-style foster care organization based in Palm Beach Gardens, has seen expenses rise since schools closed this month, executive director Charles Bender said.

With more than 345 abused children, homeless youth, pregnant teens and human trafficking survivors in daily residential care spanning six counties, the organization has had to stock up on additional supplies, food, medication and household items.

"Kids are home for the most part 24-7," Bender said. "That's a game-changer for everybody."

Like many nonprofits, the organization raises money through fund-raising events, but a handful have been postponed or canceled this quarter, Bender said. Place of Hope also had to temporarily close its Treasures for Hope charity store.

In an effort to offset an expected financial hit of at least \$800,000 to its operating budget, Place of Hope established an Emergency Response Matching Fund.

Donations will be matched dollar-for-dollar, at any level, Bender said, and will be used to meet funding gaps and directly provide for those in residential care.

"Every charity is looking at their budget right now and asking how it affects them today," he said. "We don't know what tomorrow and the next week look like. We hope to make up the difference now, and we'll see where the rest takes us."

So far, many donors have stepped up to assist, Bender said, including the nonprofit Boca West Children's Foundation, which recently distributed \$800,000 to aid local at-risk kids and the charities that serve them.

Susan G. Komen Florida, which works to eradicate breast cancer as a life-threatening disease, recently made a \$50,000 investment for treatment assistance to those who would otherwise forego treatment because of unexpected losses.

The treatment assistance fund is for patients at 250 percent of the poverty level, and goes toward specific treatment and care costs, the organization said.

The organization also moved all breast health education programs online to its Facebook page to ensure the risk to those with compromised immune systems is reduced.

"Studies show that women tend to push their health and well-being off when other urgent matters arise," said Kate Watt, Susan G. Komen Florida's Executive Director. "We want these women, and men, to know they are not alone. We are here for them, and we do not want them to forego treatments or push their health aside during this crisis."

The American Cancer Society also is working to continue providing support to cancer patients and their families despite the challenges it faces with the coronavirus pandemic, said Viviana Martir, communications director for the organization's Southeast Region.

The organization, which has closed access to all of its offices nationwide, has moved from an in-person dynamic to a virtual one.

Staffers continue to communicate regularly with patients, volunteers, partners and constituents, Martir said, and also recruit, train volunteer drivers, and secure funding through virtual means.

Many fundraisers, like a Relay for Life event that was scheduled for April 4 in Jupiter, will be held virtually.

"This is undoubtedly a challenging time," Martir said. "But the fact is, cancer does not stop, and neither do we. The American Cancer Society is open for business."