

Food Banking During the Madness of March

Libby Campbell – April 13, 2020 – Odessa, TX

There is a specific comfort in the consistency at the West Texas Food Bank's warehouse. When I wander through the racks of food and processing rooms in the cavernous warehouse, there is a constant buzz. Most times it's the staff fulfilling orders and processing donations, and others it's just the hum of the HVAC system maintaining a constant temperature for the food we keep on hand.

Consistency and constant are two words I hold in high esteem. The West Texas Food Bank (WTFB) must provide a consistent and constant service for those West Texans who need us the most. March proved to be a stress on that constant like I've never seen in the 10 years I have been the Executive Director of the Food Bank.

March came in like a lamb. Families were preparing to relax over the upcoming spring break, and we at the Food Bank were busy preparing for our annual gala event, the Forever Full Margarita Fiesta. Things were certainly different in 2020. The price of oil was down, and there was an increased awareness that a virus from a distant land was making big waves throughout the world, and Texas was more than likely in its path.

And then, the lion came roaring in. Locally the COVID-19 alert was raised. Schools decided not to come back from spring break and businesses began taking precautions. At the Food Bank, I consulted with my Board of Directors, and brought together our Senior Leadership Team to implement our disaster plan.

The decisions we made were some of the most heartbreaking decisions I have had to make in my food banking career. CDC guidelines rapidly changed and for the health and wellness of the WTFB staff, we made the decision to stop all volunteer activities. Events and classes were cancelled, including our large annual gala, and we closed the signature feature of both WTFB facilities, our Client Choice Pantries. The number one concern was to keep the team safe, and I knew we had to take drastic measures. Essentially, WTFB was closed to the public.

What you might not realize is just how much these tough decisions changed the way we do business, practically overnight. With no volunteers the warehouse staff had to step up to build our new Pantry Boxes, and with no Client Choice Pantry, our distribution model had to change to a drive-thru so we could safely serve those in need.

According to a Feeding America release, "The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented demand for food across the country, including demand in the charitable food distribution system. Year-over-year sales at U.S. grocery retailers is up between 80-200% from late February to early March due to the surge in consumer demand. This consumer demand for food has limited the Feeding America network's access to donated food, particularly shelf stable food, which is a critical need for food banks as they prepare to ramp up low and no-contact distributions."

The result of this surge is that donations of food from retail and manufactures to food banks have declined 40-60% in recent weeks, and what we are seeing at WTFB is no different. In a typical month our drivers bring in over 100,000 pounds of food from local grocery stores, but now the shelves are bare, and departments are closed as staff from services like the bakery have been reassigned to help run check-out stands, disinfect the store, and stock shelves.

Customers are purchasing the bakery, deli, and dairy items which would normally be donated, and this leaves us short. We have had to strike a delicate balance between the dwindling numbers of pounds coming in, and the increasing number of pounds going out.

One way we continue to meet the demand is through our purchased food program, which allows WTFB to buy shelf stable food directly from manufactures often at or below cost. The availability and access to these lifelines during our regular operations is crucial, but with the increased demand seen by the retail outlets, this food is proving to be difficult to acquire in a timely manner.

Here's what that means for us: in March we had to spend \$91,000, and in April, we are budgeting \$300,000. Basically, it is costing 33% more a week to run the Food Bank.

We are using the unemployment numbers as a barometer to gauge what is in store for us. As more and more West Texans find themselves not returning to work because of the health crisis, and as more and more oil field jobs are lost, our lines will continue to get longer. We are hearing stories of workers being unable to access unemployment benefits. This is evolving into a dilemma which is leaving everyone nervous, anxious, and scared.

Looking forward, I don't know what tomorrow will look like, but I do know we will continue to serve the people who need it the most, many of whom have never experienced hunger before. We have received support both big and small from our amazingly generous community, and for that I am thankful. West Texans always amaze me with their grace and grit, and we know, this too shall pass. When this is over, you will shower the West Texas Food Bank with food drives and you will show up to volunteer, just like you have time and time again, but for now, I ask that you stay home, stay safe, and please stay healthy.

Very fondly yours in service,
Libby Campbell