

Summer Hunger in West Texas

Summer hunger is something that we take very seriously around the West Texas Food Bank, and this year is no different. Before I started at the Food Bank almost 10 years ago, I had become involved with feeding children through the Odessa Junior League, where I served on the committee that created Food 2 Kids.

Food 2 Kids started as a “backpack program” in the elementary schools in Ector County. Realizing the need was much more significant than our ability to just buy food from Sam’s, we approached the West Texas Food Bank to partner with our committee to help get food to these children who were going home on the weekends and probably didn’t have a whole lot to eat.

Fast forward 10 years and Food 2 Kids now encompasses all children’s programming at the Food Bank, which accounts for around 60% of the all people we serve.

Almost every single program we operate at the Food Bank came screeching to a halt in mid-March. It gave me no pleasure to have to suspend programs that fed people, and most especially ones targeting children. Fortunately, even with the children not returning to school from Spring Break, we could rely on our partnerships with organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs to reach those who were at the greatest risk of facing hunger.

Programs like the Backpack Program take major planning. From ordering all the food which is distributed to the kiddos on Fridays, to breaking down the palletized loads into individual bags of food, it just takes a lot of planning. Since we had the food, and since we tend to stay a month ahead on bagging the food, we had something available to pass out through the Boys and Girls Clubs and other avenues like the ISDs.

But June was fast approaching, and June always presents challenges getting food to the largest population we serve, those 18 and younger.

Summer months are a strain on the household budget. Children who have been eating breakfast and lunch at school, now need to find these nutritious meals elsewhere. For many families, finding these meals started much earlier, and presented a unique challenge this year because the kiddos didn’t go back to school after Spring Break.

Kid’s Café, the program which provides a hot meal to children after school, had to stop. One of the requirements in the federal guidelines is to host these meals in a congregate feeding arrangement, and this was just not possible due to COVID-19.

In June, we distributed 1.25 million pounds of food throughout the 19 counties we serve. This is double what we distributed last June. This highlights the increased demand we are seeing at the Food Bank, but the number that staggers me the most is our cumulative total distribution for the year is 6.7 million.

You see, last year we distributed 6.4 million pounds of food, equivalent to 5.3 million meals. Our fiscal year runs from October to September, and from October '19 through the end of June '20, we have distributed over 6.7 million pounds of food. If we keep up the pace, your little food bank in West Texas will hit a distribution number of around 10 million pounds of food.

My heart sinks hearing that number, 10 million, mostly because we were never supposed to get to that number. When the two new Food Bank buildings were being designed, a consulting firm which works with food banks calculated a distribution number based on the population of the 19 counties we serve, and took into account the poverty levels and the rate at which the population and poverty rates typically grow. The decision was made to build the new West Texas Food Bank facilities to distribute 10 million pounds of food, but that capacity would probably never be reached, and this was looking 15 years in the future. This year we celebrated our fourth year in the new Distribution Facility in Odessa and our third year at the Volunteer Center in Midland.

The reason I never thought we would get to 10 million is because West Texas is strong and we are fiercely independent. We work hard and do our best to provide for our families. I know there are issues with hunger in our area, and we have the data to match, but in my opinion the area we serve should never really need over 8 million pounds of food. I also know situations change, and due to COVID-19 and its peripheral effects, such as layoffs and furloughs, we have blown right past that 8 million pound mark, and here we are at 10 million pounds of food, 11 years too soon.

The only reason we have been able to provide this food is because of you. You believe in our mission. You came together and funded our two beautiful, state of the art food bank facilities. You have shared your resources, and during this crisis you've made sure the Food Bank has been able to purchase the things we needed when we needed it, and also could keep our trucks filled with gas to deliver all of these pounds of food to the 80+ partner agencies which make up our network. You have sustained the mission of the West Texas Food Bank, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Warmly,

Libby Campbell
Executive Director, West Texas Food Bank