

COMMUNITY NEWS

Bringing produce to the people in times of crisis

BOUNTY & SOUL MODIFIES APPROACH TO MEET GROWING DEMAND BROUGHT ON BY COVID-19

Fred McCormick
The Valley Echo



Bounty & Soul Nutrition and Wellness Program Coordinator Abbie Young delivers a bag of fresh produce to a car, March 24, during the Black Mountain-based nonprofit organization's Produce to the People mobile market at St. James Episcopal Church. *Fred McCormick*

Mountain-based nonprofit organization has been a resource for fresh produce and health and wellness education to low-income Swannanoa Valley residents since its inception.

However, as the COVID-19 global pandemic began spreading throughout the state, forcing the closure of a growing list of businesses and leaving thousands of North Carolinians newly unemployed, there was a renewed sense of urgency in the mission of Bounty & Soul.

“We went right into action,” said founder and executive director Ali Casparian. “We’ve already seen an increase in demand, but so far we’ve been able to keep up.”

Driven largely by its support from dedicated volunteers, Bounty & Soul has offered a variety of health and wellness programs to the community since Casparian established the organization, in 2014, with a mission to “connect people to food, education and each other” at no cost.

While the encouragement of social distancing has forced Bounty & Soul to temporarily shutter some of its programs to help curb the spread of the virus, its most well-known offering — a mobile market known as Produce to the People — has proven to be a particularly vital resource for the community in these difficult times.



"I feel like we were called to do this at this time, because not only do we give out food, but the type of food we're giving out is crucial, especially in a time of crisis," Casparian said. "At this time, a lot of people are talking about immunity-boosting foods, which are fresh fruits and vegetables, and that's what we provide."

To compensate for the increased demand, while decreasing the risk of exposure to clients, staff and volunteers, the organization modified its operations to provide curbside service in the two weekly markets its hosting through the duration of the pandemic. Bounty & Soul's six staff and a rotating cast of volunteers will supply free food and recipes from 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. in the parking lot of St. James Episcopal Church on Tuesdays and from 4 - 6 p.m. in the parking lot of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church on Fridays.

"It's been a challenge because we're following the guidelines of the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization, so we're being extra cautious," Casparian said. "We're now limiting our volunteers to five per shift, and spacing everyone more than six feet apart. Our first priority is keeping our staff, volunteers and the community safe."

Last week, according to Casparian, Bounty & Soul provided 500 - 600 households with pre-packaged bags containing produce, recipes, flowers and handmade cards from volunteers with encouraging messages.

"We expect that number to increase in the coming weeks," she said. "We're preparing to see an increase in needs."

Currently, Casparian does not see a major disruption in the supply chain of the organization, but Bounty & Soul is becoming "more creative" in the sourcing of its food.

"We're seeing a lot of panic buying right now, and we do rescue food from some of the grocery stores, so we're seeing a bit of a decrease there," she said. "So now we're actively raising money to buy from farmers and local businesses, because our local farming industry is being hit hard."

The COVID-19 crisis has also led to a growing number of people reaching out to Bounty & Soul to offer their support, but social distancing regulations have prompted the organization to find ways people can help from home.

handmade notes that we're distributing at our markets."



A Bounty & Soul volunteer directs traffic at St. James Episcopal Church in Black Mountain on March 24. The drive-thru market is one of two weekly markets being hosted by the nonprofit organization throughout COVID-19 crisis. *Fred McCormick*

While Bounty & Soul focuses mostly on providing fresh fruits and vegetables, Casparian is also encouraging community members to donate shelf-stable food, like pasta or peanut butter.

"If people want to donate products, we will get them out to community members who need them," she said. "We will see a significant increase in need in the coming weeks, especially in this area where so many service and restaurant jobs have been impacted. But, just being there for our community, however we need to be there for our community, is our goal."

WANT TO HELP BOUNTY & SOUL BRING PRODUCE TO THE PEOPLE IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

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