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## NC food banks spring into action amid coronavirus crisis

POSTED → MARCH 30, 2020, BY [MELISSA REARDON](https://carolinapublicpress.org/author/melissa-reardon/)



**Bounty & Soul distributes food in the Black Mountain area during the coronavirus pandemic. Like other local food pantries and regional food banks, the organization's workers and volunteers are doing taking precautions while continuing to provide food. Photo courtesy of Body & Soul.**



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Across the state, unemployment has soared and food insecurity is on the rise as a result of COVID-19, but heeding the call are hundreds of statewide hunger relief organizations that have been swift to act and adapt in this ever-evolving climate.

North Carolina's 100 counties are serviced by seven large food banks, deemed essential services and exempt from the state's "stay-at-home" order, which goes into effect at 5 p.m. Monday.

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Each food bank works with hundreds of smaller nonprofit partner agencies to distribute food within their communities.

Most of these organizations are feeling the pinch between a surge in demand versus a decline in volunteer support and donations of food and money.

They also face challenges posed by clogged supply chains.

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## Adapting to change

“This virus has shifted all operations solely toward C-19 response,” said Asheville-based [MANNA FoodBank](mailto:https://www.mannafoodbank.org/) (mailto:https://www.mannafoodbank.org/), CEO **Hannah Randall**, who oversees distribution to partner agencies in the state’s 16 westernmost counties and is also the chairwoman of [Feeding the Carolinas](mailto:https://feedingthecarolinas.org/) (mailto:https://feedingthecarolinas.org/), a two-state network of [food banks](https://carolinapublicpress.org/hunger-food-insecurity-in-north-carolina) (https://carolinapublicpress.org/hunger-food-insecurity-in-north-carolina) working to feed 2.6 million people and counting.

Almost immediately following mass closures and calls for social distancing earlier this month, the food banks snapped into action, developing online COVID-19 response information, educating their partners on low- and no-contact food distribution tactics and shoring up resources for the most vulnerable populations, including low-income children and seniors.

Whereas nutrition had been a focus of many relief organizations, “that’s sharply changed,” Randall said.

Due to a drop in food donations from individuals and groceries, as well as requirements limiting the handling of food, agencies have shifted to purchasing disaster relief, nonperishable and prepackaged food items as well as hygiene and cleaning supplies, some of which have been hard to come by, particularly hand sanitizer, she notes.

[Second Harvest Foodbank of Northwest NC](mailto:https://www.secondharvestnwno.org/covid19) (mailto:https://www.secondharvestnwno.org/covid19), which covers 16 counties around Winston-Salem, is taking a few extra steps. According to a public service announcement video from CEO **Eric Aft**, the organization is supporting first responders by helping make sure their kids are fed and is planning to open a special café for unemployed hospitality workers.

Even at the more local levels of the food supply chain, organizations are adapting.

[Bounty & Soul](mailto:https://bountyandsoul.org/) (mailto:https://bountyandsoul.org/), a partner agency of MANNA FoodBank based in Black Mountain, is taking unprecedented steps to meet an increasing demand.

The nonprofit collaborates with area farmers, community gardens and groceries to provide free produce and wellness education to anyone, regardless of means, via a distribution model in the style of a farmers market. In addition to adhering to sanitary and social distancing measures at its markets, the organization is propping up farmers by purchasing produce that would otherwise be donated.

“Now is the time to support where our food comes from,” says founder and Executive Director **Ali Casparian**.

“Looking long term, we could have a food shortage,” pointing to farmers’ plights due to cutbacks from restaurants and farmers markets.

Her organization is even redirecting some of its volunteer base to help on the farms. Those vulnerable volunteers restricted to their homes are assisting by writing uplifting notes of encouragement that go into each of the bags.



**A line of cars waiting to pick up food deliveries forms outside of Haywood Christian Ministries, one of many partner organizations with Manna Food Bank that is innovating to deliver food throughout the community during the coronavirus pandemic. Photo courtesy of Manna Food Bank**

## **Challenges and the call for public support**

For hunger relief organizations, the drop in food and dollar donations, in addition to volunteers, has been significant across the board.

According to Randall, MANNA sees about 7,000 unique volunteers a year, more than half of whom are retirement age and no longer able to assist. “We’ve had to put together a strategy around volunteers,” she says. Despite a call to enlist low-risk helpers, the effort was stymied last week when

the “stay-at-home” order was announced, which she reminds, does not apply to volunteers of disaster relief organizations.

“We’re an essential service, but we don’t have personal protective equipment,” Randall points out. “These people showing up, they really are wearing an invisible cape.”

In addition to volunteers, MANNA and so many other hunger relief agencies are in dire need of funding as well.

Normally, about 80% of MANNA’s food is donated, but due to a 40% decrease in manufacturing and retail food donations, the organization has overspent. MANNA recently ordered roughly 25,000 disaster relief boxes (almost \$400,000 worth), which includes items like rice, beans and canned meats, that are being distributed among its partner agencies.

On the upside, some financial relief is in sight, as corporate grocery chains like Publix and Target, among others, have announced donations to Feeding America, the nation’s largest network of hunger relief organizations.

On the state level, The Duke Energy Foundation recently announced a \$1.3 million donation to support hunger relief organizations and health and human services nonprofits. Randall reports that MANNA is set to receive \$45,000 of that total from Duke. Every little bit helps.





**Volunteers with the Clay County Food Pantry in Hayesville practice social distancing while assisting people picking up food during the coronavirus pandemic. Photo courtesy of Manna Food Bank**

## **Need food assistance?**

Go to [feedingthecarolinas.org/locations](https://feedingthecarolinas.org/locations/) (<mailto:https://feedingthecarolinas.org/locations/>) to search for your nearest food bank, which can help you find the closest food distribution site or best option for food assistance.

## **Want to help?**

Hunger relief organizations are most in need of financial contributions and low-risk volunteers. Visit [feedingthecarolinas.org/locations](https://feedingthecarolinas.org/locations/) (<mailto:https://feedingthecarolinas.org/locations/>) to find your nearest food bank. Individual websites will point to specific needs and details on donating and volunteering.

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