



Community aid helps WNC food banks meet challenges

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by [Kay West](#)



When home cupboards are bare and wallets are empty, people often turn to food banks for assistance. In Western North Carolina, MANNA FoodBank — a member of Feeding America, the nation’s largest domestic hunger relief organization — is frequently the first responder. Located in Asheville, MANNA works with partner agencies in 16 WNC counties to distribute food — 19.8 million pounds in fiscal year 2018/19. “We’re kind of like the artery for how food gets into WNC, and we distribute through 220 different partner agencies that are like the capillaries,” explains **Hannah Randall**, MANNA CEO. “We’ve always been a crisis relief agency, dealing with people’s personal family emergencies. COVID-19 is a totally different thing and a totally different magnitude.”

The impacts of COVID-19 on food demand, supply and distribution were immediate and profound, thrusting MANNA and its smaller partner agencies into a triage response.

“When Madison County put their stay-at-home mandate into effect March 15, we had 24 new families sign up in one day,” says **Jessi Koontz**, executive director of Beacon of Hope in Marshall. “That’s how many we signed up the entire month of February. The remaining two weeks of March, we had 80 new families, another 81 in April. We served 682 families in February, 832 in March and 987 in April.”

“The impact was immediate,” says **Ali Casparian**, executive director of Bounty & Soul in Black Mountain, an organization that provides free produce markets and wellness education. “The first week or two we doubled our numbers, and they kept increasing every week. We went from distributing 12,000 pounds of food a week to over 25,000 pounds. It is challenging.”

A significant part of the immediate problem for all agencies was supply. “Food banks are all different,” says Randall. “MANNA is a high-donation-focused food bank, and normally over 80% of our food is donated.” In mid-March, MANNA saw its base of regular grocery and manufacturing donors swiftly disappear. “We had to shift to purchasing foods quite extensively, but thanks to the generosity of the public in helping us meet that need, we’ve been able to make that swing, and we’ve been able to maintain our inventory,” she says. “In March and April, we distributed 24% more food than last year at this time.”

Koontz also faced an overwhelming drop in food donations to her agency. Before the pandemic, the organization received 20,000 pounds of donations monthly from Publix, Walmart and Aldi — mostly staple items like bread, produce, dairy and meat. In March, donations dropped to 7,000 pounds and in April to 5,000 pounds.

“That was a huge hit, but because MANNA doubled down — I don’t know how they do it — we’ve been working through it,” Koontz says. “I call them on a weekly basis to ask if they have anything extra. They say, ‘Yes but you have to come pick it up.’ And I tell them I’ll be there first thing in the morning.”

Distribution methods have undergone radical changes. “The last thing you want in a health is people touching food more than once and being crowded together in one area, so we had to do



bags to a market-shopping model that permits clients to make their own choices, agencies have had to pivot to assembled boxes and curbside pickup. This has created traffic issues for some, particularly when distribution locations and days were modified.

“We had to collapse our five markets into two distribution points, which also meant we had to find room for all those cars,” Casparian recalls “A collaborative effort allowed us to use the parking lot of the former Bi-Lo in downtown Black Mountain. The first day we had traffic backed up onto I-40, so we went to Plan B and now snake cars through the lot.”

Keeping volunteers — many of whom are 60 or older and some with compromised immune systems — safe and socially distanced is of primary concern to the agencies who rely on them. But the new systems have sometimes been met with reluctance from dedicated volunteers. “I had one-on-one conversations with all of our volunteers and encouraged those at risk to step back,” says Koontz. “They stepped back, but none of them quit. They have come up with different ideas of how to keep helping.” Casparian says her sidelined volunteers have been writing notes of encouragement to put in each bag and box.

According to Randall, the MANNA warehouse counts 7,000 unique volunteers a year, with about 400 coming regularly each week. “Many of those are considered high-risk, so early on we made a public appeal for lower-risk individuals,” she says. “We have seen so many new people show up that we have been able to supplement some of our partner agencies as well. Many food banks across the country have struggled with that. I love the way our Appalachian community is finding ways to get things to people that need them.”

Koontz has been deeply moved by the contributions from the community she serves. “Our meat freezer was completely empty, then the very next day Backyard Bow Pro brought us 220 pounds of elk. Local bakers bring fresh-baked bread, East Fork [Farm] has been donating eggs, Highgate Farm and Fiddlers Green Farm have donated produce,” she says. “Some days our shelves are almost empty, and I don’t know what we’ll do — so much of our world is completely out of our control — but somehow food comes in. It’s unexplainable, and it’s just beautiful.”

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About Kay West

Kay West was a freelance journalist in Nashville for more than 30 years, contributing writer for the Nashville Scene, StyleBlueprint Nashville, Nashville correspondent for People magazine, author of five books and mother of two happily launched grown-up kids. To kick off 2019 she put Tennessee in her rear view mirror, drove into the mountains of WNC, settled in West Asheville and appreciates that writing offers the opportunity to explore and learn her new home. She looks forward to hiking trails, biking greenways, canoeing rivers, sampling local beer and cheering the Asheville Tourists.

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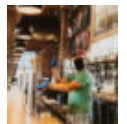
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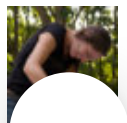
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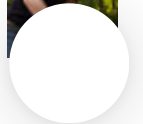


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