

Feeding a growing need

As hunger crisis grows, Every Meal gets creative with its meal distribution across the state.

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Brooklyn Center Fire Chief Todd Berg, right, talked about the winter meals program with Rob Williams, executive director of Every Meal, at the fire station, where those in need can take a bag of food.

No fire trucks blared their horns and yet, a Brooklyn Center fire station was responding to an emergency few people may even see in the suburb.

On a recent afternoon, bags of rice, beans and canned goods filled a table, ready to help a growing number of hungry Minnesotans. From fire halls to fitness centers and libraries, some 60 community buildings in Minnesota and western Wisconsin have turned into free food pickup sites for Every Meal, formerly the Sheridan Story, a Roseville-based nonprofit.

“They’re easy to access,” said Rob Williams, executive director of the nonprofit. “Our goal is to get food as close to the kids and families as possible.”

As Minnesota’s hunger crisis worsens during the coronavirus pandemic, Every Meal launched the new winter meal program, expanding its reach beyond its usual work providing students with food after school and on weekends. The new program, Williams said, gives residents another option for help. The 60 sites are mostly in the metro, along with sites in Hudson, Wis., and Hill City, near Grand Rapids, Minn.

There are no income requirements or paperwork needed for anyone to get the food. For a list of sites, go to everymeal.org/winter. The program, which costs about \$350,000 to run, started before Thanksgiving and goes through the end of January. If the nonprofit can drum up additional funding, Williams said they could extend the program.

“Food insecurity is not a supply problem, it’s a distribution problem,” Williams said. “The key is getting the food out there where it’s comfortable and safe and nearby for families to access.”

Some residents may fear the stigma of showing up to a formal social services organization, so receiving food at a rec center or fire station may feel less formal or bring more anonymity. City buildings are usually trusted institutions in a community and it’s a discreet way to get help almost

anytime, added Brooklyn Center Fire Chief Todd Berg. Residents can pick up food bags at the fire station at 6250 Brooklyn Blvd., from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week.

“People feel welcome in a fire station,” Berg said. With fire departments in every community, “it’s brilliant. It’s a good way to help the community. I see this morphing into something bigger.”

A growing need

In 2020, more Minnesotans visited food shelves than any year on record. Food shelves expect the higher need to continue for years due to the economic fallout of the pandemic. During the Great Recession, the number of visitors to food shelves doubled and never bounced back to pre-recession levels.

Like other hunger relief programs, Every Meal has doubled or tripled its amount of food, serving 50,000 meals a week — up from 20,000 pre-pandemic. At the start of COVID-19, the nonprofit served 100,000 meals a week.

Second Harvest Heartland, the state’s largest of six food banks, said the amount of food distributed by hunger relief organizations rose 30% from March to December. An estimated 550,000 to 650,000 Minnesotans are “food insecure” — without consistent access to enough food — 20 to 40% higher than pre-pandemic.

To help, donors have flooded Minnesota nonprofits with money and the state and federal government distributed \$21 million in 2020 to hunger relief organizations, up from the usual \$1.4 million a year, according to Hunger Solutions, a statewide advocacy group. The latest federal stimulus bill also included a 15% increase to food stamps, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), through June.

But federal rules end in 2021 that were relaxed during COVID-19 to get more food to more people, and Williams worries that nonprofits will see an influx in need this summer and donations won’t keep pace.

“It’s easy to respond to a disaster initially,” he said. “What we all need to remember ... is this is a long-term recovery.”

Boosting support

Every Meal started a decade ago as the Sheridan Story, named after the Minneapolis elementary school where the program originated. The school was named after Philip Sheridan, the Civil War Union general who also led a massacre of Native Americans in Oklahoma. In 2020, the nonprofit changed its name, part of a national reckoning over places commemorating historical figures with racist legacies. (The school and its northeast neighborhood are also considering name changes.)

Now the nonprofit is fundraising to double its budget to \$6 million a year, expanding meals in September to 550 schools from 300 schools now. That will mean the nonprofit, which relies mostly on donations and grants for revenue, will be serving every school in 33 school districts, which account for 40% of the state’s students.

In the past year, Every Meal has responded not just to the increasing number of families in need but also supplied pop-up food sites after Minneapolis grocery stores were destroyed in unrest after the death of George Floyd. When Sanford Middle School put out a call for 85 bags of food in June to help

south Minneapolis families suddenly without a store, people in cars stretching 14 blocks long lined up to drop off more than 20,000 bags of bread, fruit and other items. Every Meal helped the school deliver the extra food to other families.

It was a heartwarming show of support, but Williams said donations need to continue long after the initial crisis. Every Meal is also trying new things to boost the food supply, opening a garden last summer with donated Ramsey County land to harvest fresh produce. And when the nonprofit's warehouse filled up, the Mall of America offered up vacant space once occupied by Bloomingdale's.

“It takes the whole community to work against such a big issue like child hunger,” Williams said. “It’s not solvable only by the nonprofit community, only by the government or the business community or the faith community. It takes all of us.”