

Twin Cities Salvation Army launches ‘gigantic’ food drive

With need unprecedented, the goal is to raise 2 million pounds.

By KELLY SMITH kelly.smith@startribune.com



renee.jones@startribune.com

Julia Schultz loaded boxes of food onto a conveyer belt during the Friday food pantry at the Twin Cities Salvation Army in St. Paul.

The Twin Cities Salvation Army, known for its red kettles collecting spare change during the holidays, is instead hauling in extra food this spring.

For the first time, the nonprofit is holding what it hopes will be the largest single food drive ever in the Twin Cities, restocking its seven food pantries as they continue to serve more Minnesotans in need during the pandemic. From March 1-27, the organization aims to collect 2 million pounds of canned goods and other nonperishable items — enough food to fill its pantries until summer.

“We’ve done food drives before, but nothing of this scale ... one monster, gigantic-sized food drive,” said Brian Molohon, executive director of development for the Salvation Army Northern Division, which includes Minnesota and North Dakota. “It’s driven by the unprecedented need.”

Hunger relief organizations across the Twin Cities have seen a surge in the number of people in need of free meals or boxes of groceries, many of whom have never needed food assistance until now. Statewide, food shelves reported a record number of visitors in 2020 and more Minnesotans are receiving food stamps, especially in rural areas.

Now, one year into the pandemic, the need isn’t expected to recede anytime soon, but nonprofits do worry about donor fatigue.

“We wanted to keep this need in front of the community and we wanted to reinforce we can’t do it on our own,” Molohon said. “We still need your help.”

During the Great Recession, the number of visitors to Minnesota food shelves doubled and never bounced back to prerecession levels. The hunger crisis now could continue for years.

The Salvation Army's Twin Cities food pantries have seen a 140% increase in the number of visitors during the pandemic. In 2020, 40% of visitors were seeking help for the first time.

"We need the support of the community to sustain that because there is still a great need," said Don LaMar, who oversees one of the Salvation Army's food pantries in St. Paul. "Without it, I don't think we can continue to meet the needs of our community."

On Friday, outside the worship and service center in St. Paul, volunteers handed out boxes stuffed with cans of beef stew, salad, butter and milk. The food pantry is serving an average of 300 people a day, from Forest Lake to Lakeville and across the metro, for the curbside food boxes. That's compared with 15 to 30 families a day pre-COVID.

"We've seen more and more families and young people," LaMar said, adding the need has lowered from a peak of 500 families a day. But "the need is still greater than this time last year before the pandemic."

The Salvation Army, like nonprofits across Minnesota, has retooled food distribution because of COVID, doling out prepackaged boxes curbside instead of visitors shopping for their own items inside.

Starting Monday, for the first time since the pandemic, the St. Paul site at 401 7th St. W. is reopening for people to shop on their own Mondays through Wednesdays; the Friday curbside boxes will continue. The nonprofit's other food pantries will do the same in the upcoming weeks.

To drop off nonperishable food items, go to any Twin Cities location for Spire Credit Union, Cub Foods stores, Morrie's Auto Group and Salvation Army Family Stores from March 1-26.

A contactless drive-through collection will take place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. March 27 at the Salvation Army's headquarters at 2445 Prior Av. N., in Roseville. For details, go to 2MillionPounds.org.

"It's been amazing during this difficult time for many how great we've seen our community step up," LaMar said. "We're still out here doing the best to meet the need of the community."