

Attacking Food Insecurity: Solutions to Make Nutritious Meals Accessible for Arkansans

Part of a series exploring issues from The Community Foundation's *Aspire Arkansas* report.

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Our Neighbors Are Hungry



Who do we help when we address food security? We often think of a person experiencing homelessness or someone out of work. But those are not the only Arkansans who are hungry. Many times, the hungry are children trying to learn, teens trying to grow, and adults trying to be productive employees.

For those of us who have always known complete food security, it is hard to comprehend the magnitude of hunger for people who are food insecure. But our Aspire Arkansas data clearly shows that many Arkansans are hungry. We must get out of our comfort zones and volunteer at programs that address hunger in our community. There are hundreds of efforts in our state working to end food insecurity, and they are changing the lives of those who are helping as well as those who receive food. These are the stories I hear

- A Marmaduke School District bus driver telling that a student receiving food from the district’s backpack program got on the bus visibly excited with a huge smile and openly thankful for the food received.
- A UA Cossatot Community College employee and recent graduate deciding to volunteer for the college’s food bank because her family received food during the 2008 recession from a nonprofit.
- A volunteer at a Little Rock Methodist church sharing about the bold, significant and courageous accomplishments of the older people she met as recipients of the church’s hunger relief program.

Addressing food insecurity goes beyond handing out non-perishable foods, though that is important. The issue goes deeper. Arkansans must have access to fresh, healthy foods that allow them to be productive citizen of our state.

Join me in learning more about some of the Arkansans who are food insecure and the programs that are helping them in this issue of *ENGAGE*.

Best regards,

Heather Larkin
President and CEO



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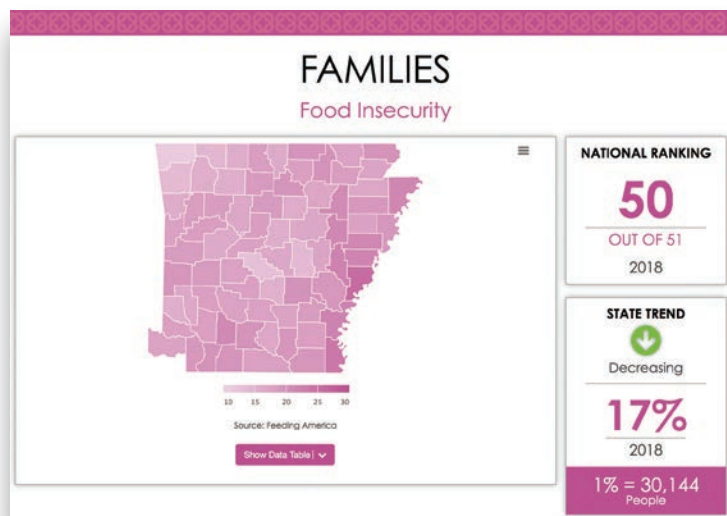
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Find data on ALICE families at aspirearkansas.org/families/food-insecurity.

On the cover: Haley Lemaire-Watson struggles to afford nutritious food for herself and her infant son, Briar.



Hunger in Arkansas Has Many Faces

By Kimberly Dishongh



Ray Santiago and his wife, Lona, often care for their grandchildren (left to right: Aaliyah Mooney, 13, Malachai Santiago, 5, and Isaiiah Santiago, 6, while their daughters work. Santiago did full-time factory work for 36 years, but a health crisis ended his ability to work and it suddenly became a challenge for his family to secure enough food.

Ray Santiago didn't worry about being able to put food on his family's table during the nearly four decades he worked full-time positions at a sweet potato plant and a chicken processing plant.

Health problems — a heart attack and a work-related knee injury — changed everything.

"I had a 36-year clean record of working until then," said Santiago, 57.

Eight years ago, he lost his job, no longer able to work and buying groceries became a challenge. His wife was working as a home-health aide, but she had no healthcare benefits and she also suffered a heart attack.

He sought governmental assistance but the process of getting help was slow.

"I was getting a disability check, but for the longest time,

they were telling me that I was making too much money," he said. "That's kind of strange, because I tried to calculate how me and my wife, the two of us, were going to survive on \$900 a month — that's rent, utilities and everything else."

He and his wife sold as many of their personal belongings as they could to make ends meet. and they downsized from a three-bedroom home to a small apartment.

"That's a big change in life," he said.

They subsisted for a while on vegetables from friends' gardens and deer meat, turkey and other wild game.

Santiago found his way to the food pantry at Zion Lutheran Church in Augsburg, one of the oldest in the area, and a few other churches in his area. Those pantries offered vegetables and eggs, fresh from a farm.

"It was rough at the beginning because of trying to figure out where are you going to get your next meal from and where

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Health problems — a heart attack and a work-related knee injury — changed everything.

Haley Lemaire-Watson has also had to figure things out as she goes along. She wanted to be a baker and was in college studying culinary arts when the Covid-19 pandemic hit last year.

She started out commuting to Arkansas Tech University in Russellville from her home in Ola, but gas was expensive, so she moved into an apartment close to campus with roommates. When most of her classes moved online, she went back home to Ola.

With her home Wi-Fi lagging she had trouble keeping up with her coursework and dropped out of classes. Around that time she discovered she was pregnant. There wasn't enough room for her and a new baby in her family's small apartment, so she had to find a place of her own. She had been working in the kitchen at a nursing home in Danville but was laid off. When she lost her job, she sold as many of her belongings as she could and tried to make some money selling photos she took with her smart phone.

"I used to have a nice, good camera, but that was stolen from me, along with a couple of other things," she said.

On Mother's Day this year she decorated wooden boards with flowers. She thought about doing restaurant deliveries, but her car's alternator went out and now she doesn't have the money to pay for repairs.

"So I'm on foot right now. I'm in a bit of a crisis, trying to pay rent," she said.

She gets Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits, but food is still a challenge.

"I know while you're pregnant it's just based on keeping the mother healthy," she said. "Then after the baby is born, it changes."

She understands the rationale of benefit adjustments based on whether the mother is breastfeeding or if the baby is formula-fed.

"But then again, I believe the mother should be able to be healthy and energized enough to take care of the baby," she said. "I don't know why they cut it down like that."

She was on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for a while, but she moved and forgot to notify the office within 10 days and thus was dropped.

"I'm working on trying to get that back," she said.

She can't buy meat with WIC, but she can buy the spinach her doctor, upon diagnosing her with anemia, told her to eat to boost her iron levels.

"I just can't get a lot of it," she said.

Her son, 5-month-old Briar, needs a special formula and she has run out mid-month, limited to six cans through WIC.

"Before I got on WIC I was spending \$20-30 dollars a can," Lemaire-Watson said.

She eats less herself to make ends meet.

"I haven't eaten anything yet today," she said. "I was pretty much training my body to go down to one meal a day so that I can make it last. I'm hungry, yeah, but if I eat three times a day I'm not gonna have anything very long."

Joyce Bettis of El Dorado, too, tries to ration her groceries. "I don't eat very much, maybe one or two small meals a day," she said.

Bettis, 83, worked for many years as a nurse — three days a week at a Little Rock hospital and two days a week at a hospital in El Dorado. She later got a job as a home healthcare nurse. Her husband, who died in 2018, had a good job, too, as a truck driver and mechanic.

"I took care of people for years," Bettis said, referring to both her career and her charitable donations of both money and time. "I guess I was hoping someone would take care of me when I got old."

Bettis used to get canned beans or corn from a food pantry, but she can't eat many of the foods she used to enjoy. "A lot of things are too spicy, and they hurt my stomach," she said. "I lost most of my teeth so I can't chew anything." Sometimes she has a thick hamburger patty on a soft bun or some macaroni and cheese. Sometimes her meal consists of bread with jelly.

"I can't buy expensive stuff," she said. "Between paying for food and utilities, it's hard. Sometimes I just don't have enough money."

Still, Bettis admitted, she has a hard time asking for help. "It's just not like me to have somebody wait on me," she said. "I'm used to being the caregiver and I'm not used to having to ask somebody to do for me."

Some communities have addressed that challenge by setting up Little Free Pantries.

Clancy McMahan, an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Prairie Grove, said that church used to offer food to people in need once a month, but saw participation decline steeply. McMahan and another parishioner collaborated to build a white wooden box that looks like the church itself and the church filled it with food. It's open and accessible to the public at all times, no questions asked.

"Once we started a Little Free Pantry, it seemed like there was still a need because people were stopping by for that," he said.

He doesn't see most of the people who take food from the Little Free Pantry, but he was outside recently when a young woman came by.



Haley Lemaire-Watson was in culinary school when the pandemic hit. She struggles to afford basic necessities for her and her son.

"She mentioned she needed food and she seemed embarrassed by it," he said.

She might have been trying to get out of an abusive relationship, he guessed, and she might have worried about being tracked down by her abuser if she filled out the paperwork required by most food pantries.

The young adult group at the First Assembly of God in Hector created a Blessing Box, a few years ago for much the same reason.

Rev. Shannon Pruitt said while there is a convenience store in Hector the only standalone grocery store closed.

"There's a lot of poverty in the area," he said. "I think a lot of people truly need help."

The church stocked the Blessing Box with non-perishables in 2020, he said. "We only had to do that once," he said. "That's how much the community stepped in and just filled the gap. We've had people put homemade bread in there, homemade jelly, produce from their gardens ..."

He sees a couple of vehicles visit the Blessing Box regularly, but he knows others come throughout the evening when few people are watching.

"We try not to make it a big 'thing,'" said Kortlind Baker

Johnson, a member of the young adult group. "We don't want people feeling uncomfortable."

Santiago remembers how hard it was to ask for help when he needed it.

"I'm sitting here in line with people waiting for food and waiting for a handout and then I started realizing that we needed it, and pride had to step back and we had to accept the help from these people," he says. "Now I have people contacting me, asking me for information about where to go and who to talk to and I am glad to help people out. If they need a ride to the food bank or to one of these places where they do offer assistance, I'll give them a ride or help them out in any way that I can."

He experienced feeling desperate — and desolate — and he wants to make sure others can avoid that.

"It works a person's mental state. When you're hungry and you need help, a person starts getting depressed and there's no one to talk to about what to do," he said. "I tell people, 'Don't give up. There's hope out there. There's always somebody that will help you out.'"

Things are looking up for Santiago.

"We do have a roof over our heads," he said. "We do have food in our refrigerator and in our pantry. We're not set but we were able to survive."

Food Pantry Helps Students Succeed



Diana Ramirez, Magdalena Lugo and Jhamilex Hernandez prepare food bags for students.

Magdalena Lugo was walking to class on UA Cossatot Community College's De Queen Campus when she saw a student lying on the grass. Thinking he may have been hurt, she asked if he was okay. "I'm just hungry," the student said. He is not alone.

Active in the college's Student Leadership Academy, Lugo knew how to help by directing the student to the Center for Student Success to get a food bag and meal voucher for the campus cafe. Lugo recalled that story as she explained why the Center's food pantry is so important.

"A lot of people are struggling to pay food bills here in De Queen. I'm one of those people who needed help," said Lugo. "We are working fast-food jobs, going to school and trying to get enough sleep."

The heart of the Center for Student Success is Erika Buenrostro, UA Cossatot's director of Student Success and Enrichment. Hired as an admissions advisor and recruiter in 2013, Buenrostro saw nonacademic needs that were not being met at the college. She met with her supervisor

and college leadership to establish the Center for Student Success.

"It took a year to get everything approved," Buenrostro said. "We established a safe place for students to hang out, watch TV, wait for their rides, study and pick up the food and supplies they needed. The Center for Student Success is now a department serving students who attend classes on all UA Cossatot Campuses or online that provides food, soft skills and financial literacy training."

Lugo first came to the Center because she needed to get a driver's license and the local bureau was not open during COVID-19 restrictions. Buenrostro helped her get transportation to Hope, the nearest place to take the exam. Afterward, Lugo joined the Center's Student Leadership Academy and began working as a volunteer for the food pantry.

"The Leadership Academy has two groups. The first group helps the Latino community by translating information about assistance available in our community and creating a website about resources. The second group is more hands-on, filling bags for the food pantry and stocking shelves," said Lugo.



Some students are shy and hesitant to pick up food bags and meal vouchers from the Center. Helping to meet this need, UA Cossatot instructors often pick up necessary supplies for their students. “Students can be helped anonymously through our network of instructors who pay attention to their students’ needs,” said Buenrostro. “I depend on the faculty here to make this program work for everyone.”

Traditional food bags with shelf-stable items, dairy products and frozen foods are offered once a week. The most popular service is a \$20 meal voucher card available every other week honored at the college’s campus cafes. Through a grant from the Arkansas Community Foundation and funds from other sources, the Center can offer these bi-weekly meal voucher cards.

Buenrostro works with the campus cafes as they offer students \$5.99 specials each school day, helping to stretch the benefits of the voucher card. Since there is not a campus café on the Ashdown Campus, Buenrostro worked with a local restaurant across the street from the campus to take the voucher cards and help students in need.

Volunteer Diana Ramirez is a graduate of UA Cossatot and an employee working in Financial Aid. Ramirez sees many families who cannot afford to continue supporting their college-age children because they have other children at home to feed.

“I remember one student who lived in her car most of the semester and had to ask other students for help getting food,” said Ramirez. “Eventually we were able to help her get a place to live and get the food she needed. We want students to know we have food, and we will try to help them any way we can.”

When Ramirez’s family went through a difficult time in the 2000s, they benefited from community food drives, and Ramirez is happy that her college is helping students in need. “I am very proud that my college is doing this. I was there once. Other people were there for me, and I want to do the same,” Ramirez said.

The community has rallied around efforts to support the Center’s food pantry. Buenrostro is a member of the Rotary Club of De Queen. When the Rotary Club asked what they could do to help, Buenrostro expressed the need for freezers. The Rotary Club of De Queen provided two freezers while other community groups such as Sevier County Edge and Memorial Baptist Church in De Queen donated additional freezers.

In addition to food, students can receive hygiene products such as shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrushes and soap from the Center. The Center not only serves students in Southwest Arkansas but students from Texas, California, Louisiana and Florida who may have received scholarships for tuition but lack sufficient resources to purchase food and hygiene products.

During the fall and spring semesters, the Center for Student Success food pantry served 130-plus students a month on their De Queen, Ashdown and Nashville campuses. The Center is working to set up services for the Lockesburg campus. As the work has expanded, the Center has hired a full time employee, Alisa Cooke, and part-time assistant, Jhamilex Hernandez, who works on the Nashville campus.

“I chose UA Cossatot in Nashville because I wasn’t ready to go far from home. Back then, I was nervous and would not speak at all. When I joined Student Ambassadors and the Center’s Student Leadership Academy, I learned to speak up and to help recruit students. We worked to provide food during COVID-19 at a community event that benefited 300 families,” said Hernandez.

After Hernandez joined the Student Leadership Academy, she gained the necessary skills to work for UA Cossatot in the Center for Student Success. “Working here is a huge eye-opener. You may have everything you need but others do not. It makes you value what you have. Here I’ve learned to be a part of the solution,” she said.



Erika Buenrostro and Diana Ramirez discuss the importance of the food pantry.



Erika Buenrostro and Magdalena Lugo inspect new insulated food bags.

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No One is Turned Away The Bentonville Islamic Center Drive-Through Pantry

As one of the Five Pillars of Islam, charity plays a huge part in everyday life for Muslims around the world. In Northwest Arkansas at the Bentonville Islamic Center helping those less fortunate by giving of free time is one way it is done. Volunteering, donating Zakat and ongoing charity are some of the many ways that Islamic teachings prioritize charity in the wider world.

Established in 2005 as a nonprofit religious organization, the original members of the Bentonville Islamic Center started in a small home. As the community grew from a handful, the group decided to move on to larger rented halls, until finally moving into the current mosque located in Bentonville. Today, they are a community of over 350 members from the Northwest Arkansas and Southwestern Missouri areas.

Called to charity by their faith, members of the Islamic Center began making hot meals and sending them to local shelters. But when Arkansas reported its first case of COVID-19 and the demand for food continued to grow, the Islamic Center had to adjust and find a way to scale up safely. “We were just trying to do something to help,” said Issa Abboud, a volunteer and President of the Center. “We knew we couldn’t just stop, because hunger doesn’t stop.”

The Center serves the Islamic Community, but the food pantry is for anyone. When demand increased, the volunteers who normally cooked and helped deliver food began a drive-through pantry for anyone in need on Saturdays between 4 and 5 p.m.

“My wife suggested that we set up a website so people could sign up for food, to give us an idea of how much food we needed. I am the resident technology volunteer, but I’d never done a website before, so I had to learn. Now, people can visit our site and sign up for food. If they sign up by midnight on Thursday, they can pick up their food on Saturday,” Abboud said. “We pre-package boxes of food every Friday, and it is about one week’s worth of food.”

When the pantry first started, the Center was paying retail prices for all the food and supplies. Eventually, the Center partnered with the NWA Foodbank and began getting food at wholesale prices. “At the height of the pandemic, we would see 50 or more vehicles come through in one hour. And many times, people hadn’t registered online and just showed up. We helped them too,” Abboud said.

Many lessons were learned along the way as the Center began distribution. “If you can’t afford food, you probably can’t afford many other things,” said one volunteer at the Center.



A byproduct for the Center’s outreach is to help provide a more positive image of the Islamic faith.



This experience volunteering and establishing the pantry has really challenged our stereotypes about who is in need.

— Issa Abboud



“So we partnered with Care for Women, a local nonprofit supporting women’s needs in the area. They began providing us with feminine hygiene kits to include in the boxes of food for women. When you order your food online, you can just add the kits to your order.”

People from all walks of life benefit from the Center’s pantry. “This experience volunteering and establishing the pantry has really challenged our stereotypes about who is in need,” said Abboud. “We helped one woman that worked two jobs as a nurse’s assistant. When working, she could afford a nice car, but when she contracted COVID-19 and was out of work for several weeks, all her money went to bills and healthcare. So when someone is in a food pantry line in a nice vehicle, we have no judgement for what they may seem to be able to afford. It doesn’t preclude them from needing food. This pandemic affected everyone.”

The Center received a grant from Arkansas Community Foundation’s COVID-19 Relief Fund in 2020 to help buy a refrigerator and freezer. This purchase allowed the Center to offer fresh food like meats and produce. “It’s hit or miss on the fresh foods, depending on what is available,” said Abboud. “But the cold storage was a wonderful upgrade. We try to provide a balanced box of food so that people aren’t just eating processed food.

“We are 100% volunteer-run, so we try to be as cost efficient as possible. I bring my kids to help. We use

walky-talkies and have a pretty good operation set up for pick-up day. Even the boxes we package the food in are donated. We create a few extra food boxes each week in case someone shows up who didn’t register online. We never turn anyone away,” said Abboud.

The Center doesn’t have a marketing budget and wants to get the word out about the pantry for anyone that needs the help. There is no formal application process or income qualifications to help their clients maintain a level of dignity and privacy. It does ask some demographic questions for reporting purposes, but other than that, anyone can get food.

A byproduct for the Center’s outreach is to help provide a more positive image of the Islamic faith. “Charity is a huge part of our faith. It isn’t optional. One of the values that the Center continues to hold is that while charity is important, local charity, the kind that helps neighbors in need, is best.

“We had one person arrive at the drive-through in need of food driving a large truck with lots of political stickers on it. At first, I was a little concerned, but after a moment’s reflection, I thought ‘this is awesome!’” said Abboud. “We ended up having a wonderful conversation with them and they got the food they needed. We don’t care who is in need. That’s why we are doing this. To make sure people get the food they need, no matter who they are.”



The Center received a grant from Arkansas Community Foundation’s COVID-19 Relief Fund in 2020 to help buy a refrigerator and freezer. This purchase allowed the Center to offer fresh food like meats and produce.

The Warehouse in Woodruff County

Food Distribution, Cooking Classes and Wellness Education

“Thank you m'am. I appreciate y'all. Have a good day,” said Eula Brown of McCrory as a volunteer placed groceries in her car and handed her The Warehouse newsletter with recipes and wellness information.

Everyone in the 100 cars that pulled through the line on a hot July Tuesday morning in downtown McCrory was appreciative of the food and information. But they missed the opportunity to enjoy each other's company, participate in cooking classes and get their blood pressure checked at the monthly community gathering at The Warehouse.

Since 2017 the Woodruff County Office of the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service and ARcare, a federally qualified health center headquartered in Augusta, have partnered with the City of McCrory and community volunteers for The Warehouse. COVID-19 pushed the third Tuesday of the month experience to a drive-by format, but everyone was excited about getting back inside to the community space this July. Then COVID-19 numbers rose causing a last-minute cancellation of group activities.

“The Warehouse does more than distribute food and teach people how to eat healthy on a budget,” said McCrory native Lauren Fields, MBA, BSN, RN, Chief Nursing Officer for ARcare. “It enriches our community to come together to help each other. We look forward to getting back to inside events – people's mental health is important, and for some people it is the bright spot in their month.”

McCrory Mayor Doyle Fowler observed the line of cars backed up at 9:30 a.m. proved that there is a need for supplemental food for citizens in Woodruff County. “Originally ARcare received grant money to distribute food and Leigh Ann Bullington of the County Extension Service began instruction in how to prepare healthy meals from the food that was being distributed,” he said.

Use of the multipurpose Civic Center known to everyone as The Warehouse is provided by the City, and the organizers brought in freezers to store frozen foods like turkey and chicken in addition to the shelf stable foods, all purchased from the Northeast Arkansas Foodbank in Jonesboro at discounted prices.

“Every month I take a look at what is available at the Foodbank and find ingredients to make at least a day's

worth of meals. It's always different. Sometimes I have to store items until we have enough for everyone, but I put together the best we have to offer,” said Nelda West, ARcare Community Health Worker. “We can all see the need, and people are so thankful. In Parkin I have seen people walk, bicycle and ride lawnmowers to pick up their food.”

Four years ago focus groups were held to determine what would do the most good for Woodruff County, according to Leigh Ann Bullington, a County Family and Consumer Sciences Agent with the Woodruff County Cooperative Extension Office. The answer was that McCrory needed a food program not specifically based on low income, but open to all who had even a temporary need for nutritious food, plus tips on healthy food preparation and wellness services.

“We've been coming since it started. At first I didn't know they were giving out food but now I know that a lot of people depend on that food,” said Sue Middleton of Patterson, a town two miles from McCrory. “I really like the demonstrations. My husband has diabetes, and I've learned how to make healthier food for him and what he does and doesn't need to eat. We've had our blood pressures taken and mine wasn't high, but my husband's was.”

Sam Miller of McCrory, a retiree who works part-time for the Extension Service as a SNAP educator, helps with the food distribution each month and keeps up with how many citizens receive food and the demographics of those who participate.

“It's a small county with a lot of elderly and disabled people,” said Miller. “The Warehouse is held late in the month because lots of people receive benefits at the first of each month and this helps them stretch their food dollars when it's needed most.”

In July Miller was joined at his drive-through post by several volunteers, including dietetics interns from Arkansas State University who were getting a look at the real world as a part of their community nutrition rotation. “We love it here with Miss Leigh Ann,” said intern Laura Rivera. “We're doing cooking demonstrations and helping with kitchen safety techniques.”

Intern Alexandra Roberts especially enjoyed providing Zoom instruction from a studio Bullington set up at the Extension Office. “Once we showed how to cook purple hull pea fritters – they were so good! And the county agriculture agent talked about how to grow the peas.”

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Eula Brown is appreciative of the food and other programs available at The Warehouse.

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The Warehouse has expanded to a monthly event in Parkin in Cross County and use of the mobile “Grow Trailer” in smaller towns like Patterson, Hunter and Gregory where it can reach people who might not have transportation into McCrory.

A program distributing boxed canned food to seniors and others who are homebound is in the works. And supplemental food to children who are out of school for the summer like cereal, peanut butter and snacks are being distributed. In addition, the McCrory Church Alliance operates a store two days a week that provides emergency food when needed, along with affordable clothing and utility assistance.

Mayor Fowler is excited about a planned Making McCrory community event where citizens will gather to share ideas on how to strengthen their town. A monthly Farmer’s Market that brings fresh produce to town was an outgrowth of the first such community meeting three years ago.

For participants like Brown, who cares for her disabled daughter, The Warehouse is a welcome source of supplemental food. “It’s especially important for seniors and those who don’t have jobs,” she said. “I just think it’s a wonderful thing for everyone with all we’re going through.”



Volunteers help package and distribute food from The Warehouse in McCrory.



Farm to Food Pantries: Fresh Pantry Food Project Combats Food Insecurity

“It is imperative that food security advocates create the infrastructure necessary to fight hunger and food insecurity in a healthy way. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed fragilities in our local food system,” said Niki Evansingston.

Zenenvirotech is an Arkansas-based nonprofit established in 2010 to work with the global community to protect natural resources through conservation practices, environmentally sustainable food sourcing initiatives and community service projects.

One of its local flagship food security projects, Fresh Pantry, originated in 2016, but didn’t get funded until 2020 when the demands for food increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic (and still) many Arkansans have been unable to get fresh eggs, fruits and vegetables due to a disruption in the food supply chain.

“It is imperative that food security advocates create the infrastructure necessary to fight hunger and food insecurity in a healthy way. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed fragilities in our local food system,” said Evansingston.

“We work to combat this issue by connecting local specialty crop farmers to local food pantries and soup kitchens, providing nutrient-rich foods to Arkansans in food deserts. The fresh produce is purchased from local farmers and donated to food pantries within 48 hours of harvest.”

Food deserts are portions of the state where it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh food. To help combat the accessibility issues and to help local farmers, the Fresh Pantry project provides high-quality, locally sourced food for Arkansans in these locales.

Thanks to a second round of funding from the Anne Fund and Arkansas Community Foundation, Zenenvirotech was able to register local specialty crop farmers as vendors for the program to provide fresh eggs, fruits, vegetables and herbs for Arkansans where they are normally difficult to acquire. The farmers are connected to the Fresh Pantry program for 25 weeks to grow, sell and distribute fresh produce, which generates income for the farmers and stocks local pantries and soup kitchens with healthy food.

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Farmers with Zenenvirotech grow fresh produce for distribution to local food pantries and shelters.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed fragilities in our local food system.

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Since inception, over 1,100 pounds of produce has been distributed to food insecure Arkansans through the Fresh Pantry project. Fresh Pantry boosts the economy through its partnership with local specialty crop farmers growing the food and boosts the nutrition of recipients.

“It increases access to locally grown produce and other farm-fresh products. Our target audience typically relies on community food programs. In addition to providing nutrient-dense food to vulnerable populations, Fresh Pantry is creating and expanding market opportunities for limited resource specialty crop farmers,” Evansingston said. “It’s a win-win.”

Healthy Community Jubilee Farm in Forrest City is a Fresh Pantry vendor providing lemongrass, cucumbers and green leafy vegetables for food pantries in St. Francis County. Fresh Pantry vendor Sunlight Farm in Marvell grows carrots, melons, peas, eggs and leafy green vegetables for distribution in various parts of the Arkansas Delta.

Zenenvirotech also works with school and urban gardens designing the beds, planning each growing season, teaching conservation practices, providing and planting seeds and seedlings, hiring labor for maintenance and educating students, parents and residents about how to properly sustain and harvest crops. In Pine Bluff, Zenenvirotech works with Audrey Long, a leader at the State Street Community Garden to assist them with becoming more involved with their local food system.

“One of my favorite stories is of a senior citizen in Forrest City. After receiving her Fresh Pantry food box, she reached out to her City Council representative and praised him for helping to bring Fresh Pantry to her area,” said Evansingston. “The woman had not been able to obtain fresh produce because of pandemic-related closures. She had not eaten some of the fruits and vegetables that were provided in her boxes since childhood, when her mother grew food for their family in their home garden.”

Supporting food security initiatives that implement farm-to-table models are vital to the establishment and sustainability of healthy communities. “The purchasing power of Arkansans is paramount and has the potential to greatly benefit economies statewide when buying and consuming homegrown foods become more of a way of life throughout Arkansas. If Arkansans request that their grocery stores, convenience stores, restaurants, hospitals, schools, and other facilities that provide sustenance put policies in place to purchase, stock, and use a minimum of 30% of perishable products from area sources, viable local food systems can be established and perpetuated in more areas of our state,” said Evansingston.

People can also make a difference by requesting that their local food suppliers buy local produce. Grocery stores, convenience stores, restaurants, hospitals, schools and other facilities that provide sustenance can put policies in place to use local foods. If these institutions purchase, stock and use a minimum of 30% of perishable products from local sources, they could make huge impact on small economies statewide, according to Evansingston.

Zenenvirotech is always in need of volunteers to assist with building community and school gardens as space becomes available. The organization is also in need of help with growing their presence on social media. Those interested in donating, volunteering or learning more may call **501-960-6451** or email **zenenvirotech@yahoo.com**.



Zenenvirotech is always looking for volunteers to assist with helping build gardens and community spaces to grow food.





What Can We Do to Stop Hunger in Arkansas?

*Kathy Webb, Executive Director
Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance*

Arkansas has consistently ranked among the worst states for hunger — among children, seniors and adults. After the recession in 2007-2008, it took us a full decade to return to pre-recession levels of hunger. Since March of 2020, we have seen another surge, brought on by the pandemic and the economic hardships caused by it.

The six Feeding America food banks in Arkansas, founding members of the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, distributed 95 million pounds of food last year — a whopping increase of 30,000,000 pounds over the previous year. People who never dreamed of using the charitable food network or applying for federal assistance found themselves doing both. And here, we saw the impact hit Black and brown communities harder than others.

What now? We know that to be successful in alleviating hunger for the short and long-term we must have a strong charitable hunger relief network AND a strong safety net. We must work with elected officials to keep waivers in place that have allowed pantries flexibility for food distribution, and out of school programs and school districts flexibility in how they serve meals to kids.

We must pass legislation that allows states to respond in a variety of ways to reach children, including two pieces of legislation currently before Congress, Sen. John Boozman’s Hunger-Free Summer for Kids Act and the Summer Meals Alternative Relief and Transportation Act (SMART), introduced by Sen. Cory Booker and Sen. John Cornyn.

These measures would go far in providing Arkansas families with the food their children need. And we need Arkansans to get involved with the Alliance as we work with our elected officials on Childhood Nutrition Reauthorization, The Farm Bill. We can’t afford to spend a decade waiting for recovery from the effects of the pandemic on hunger on Arkansas.

Arkansans stepped up to the challenge in 2020, and we need that help again. One south Arkansas school district went from serving meals on campus to delivering meals, providing pick-up services and in the just passed school year, meals in the classroom, cafeteria, pick-up and delivery, offering multiple meals for children attending school remotely.

The district’s nutrition director recently told the Alliance how important our support had been to their district, enabling them to purchase needed equipment for the various methods of meal distribution: “seeing the response of the kids when we deliver the meals makes the extra work worth it... one kid hungry is one kid too many!” We couldn’t agree more.



Kathy Webb



**NO ARKANSAN SHOULD
EVER GO TO BED HUNGRY.**





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Giving Is in Our DNA

A force in Arkansas farming and communication industries for decades, Ritter Arnold’s family has always chosen to be charitable in the communities where they do business. Arnold is a longtime fundholder with Arkansas Community Foundation, sits on multiple boards in Arkansas and comes from a long line of intentional philanthropists.

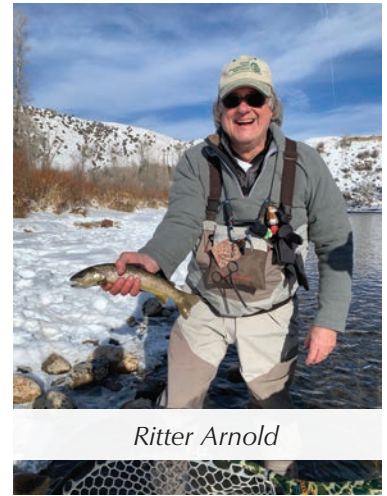
“My grandparents sponsored three Polish families who were displaced during World War II. They brought them to Marked Tree and helped them rebuild their lives. I think charity is just in our family’s DNA,” Arnold said.

The Community Foundation has helped Arnold’s family build their legacy through an endowment and bring focus to their charitable giving through a Donor Advised Fund. “Years ago, my family and I decided that we wanted to be more intentional about our giving. We were always getting lots of asks for money, from beauty pageants to baseball teams, and those were all fine to help, but with the Foundation, we were able to narrow it down to the areas where we could have deeper community impact,” Arnold said. “We opened a Donor Advised Fund, and our family’s giving preferences focus on food security, healthcare, quality housing and access to broadband.”

Anticipating the recent demand for food through the

pandemic, the Arnold family helped the Foodbank of Northeast Arkansas expand capacity and operations. “We like to help organizations that are efficient and well run. The foodbank was one of those, led by Christie Jordan. She and her team have the infrastructure to help more people. The foodbank was able to use our gift to expand their services. They get food at wholesale, then distribute it to the pantries that need it most,” Arnold said.

“I know that the need is just as great in July of 2021 as it was in July of 2020. It will take some people years to recover. Having access to food is an easy way to help them with one less thing to worry about,” said Arnold. “That’s why we work with the Foundation — they make our charitable giving easy, but more importantly, they’ve helped us find the most reliable organizations to support.”



Ritter Arnold

