Building Capacity & Resiliency in Arizona’s Food Banks

Support **SB 1369** *(appropriations; coordinated hunger services)*

In 2019, food insecurity levels across the country were at their lowest in 20 years, but that still meant more than 935,000 Arizonans struggled with hunger, including 1 in 5 children. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we estimate that 1.4 million Arizonans are facing food insecurity, many for the first time. To meet the growing demand for emergency food assistance and build resiliency, the Arizona Food Bank Network (AzFBN) and its members request an additional $1 million in annual ongoing funding for the Coordinated Hunger Services line item administered by the Department of Economic Security (DES).

AzFBN’s member food banks and a statewide network of nearly 1,000 partner agencies provided emergency food assistance to an average of **450,000 people each month** in 2019. In 2020, as a result of the dual public health and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, our network served as many as **1.2 million–1.4 million people monthly**, with surges during the holidays. With two USDA Food Programs that contributed 65 percent of our network’s federal commodities over the past two years expiring in 2020, we are concerned about how to meet continued high demand. While Arizona received additional emergency food assistance in the most recent COVID relief package (H.R. 133 in December 2020), this will only cover the immediate need; it is not enough to sustain our network’s storage and distribution costs for the next few years of economic recovery.

The State provides partial support for hunger relief efforts, including transportation, storage, and distribution of USDA commodity food boxes for the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which backfills the shortfall in federal resources. General Funds used for hunger relief total $1,254,600—an amount that has not increased since FY-02, despite a 45 percent increase in demand. (See graph below.) By increasing GF support, our network will be able to keep the capacity that we have developed during the pandemic and be better able to both meet the higher demand of a growing state population and meet peak demands during future emergencies. In addition, we may be able to continue some of the services implemented during the pandemic, which include a pilot home-delivery program for seniors, mobile distributions to tribal communities, and stronger collaboration with our agriculture and school partners.

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1 “Food insecurity” is the lack of reliable access to sufficient nutritious food needed to live a healthy lifestyle.
3 Member food banks: Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, HonorHealth Desert Mission Food Bank, St. Mary’s Food Bank Alliance, United Food Bank, and Yuma Community Food Bank
4 The Farmers-to-Families Food Box Program was recently extended through April 2021.
5 Estimate based on pounds of food distributed by AzFBN members with TEFAP contracts in FY-02 and FY-20.
This graph illustrates that Arizona’s food banks have dramatically increased the amount of food distributed over the past 15 years, alongside steady population growth and unemployment trends aligned with the Great Recession and the current COVID-19 crisis. While AzFBN doesn’t anticipate post-COVID recovery to look exactly the same as post-Recession recovery, it’s important to note that it took 10 years for the unemployment rate in Arizona to significantly decline after the Recession, and it never quite returned to pre-Recession levels. Our food banks need additional support to meet current unprecedented demand and withstand the multi-year recovery ahead.

Nearly 40 percent of the 193 million pounds of food our network distributed in FY-20 was fresh produce. We have long prioritized healthy and nutritious food, including produce, dairy, and protein, to improve health outcomes. Food insecurity and obesity go hand-in-hand, in part because some of the most affordable food tends to be the least healthy. Making nutritious food more accessible is critical to ending this ongoing health crisis, and AzFBN is grateful for one-time resources from the State in FY-19 to grow those efforts. With additional ongoing resources we could purchase a greater quantity of healthy items.

Food banks are a lifeline for Arizonans in need. That has never been more clear than during the COVID-19 pandemic, when our food banks have seen 2–3 times as many people in their lines. Food bankers and state partners continue to work tirelessly to meet demand, with support from public and private resources. Many of the modified practices and new programs our network has implemented as a result of lessons learned from the pandemic have gone a long way to improving health outcomes for low-income families, and we hope to continue them with ongoing support.

We urge you to support SB 1369 to strengthen the food bank network and help Arizonans in need. For more information, please contact Ashley St. Thomas at ashley@azfoodbanks.org.

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6 This graph was scaled. Unemployment data are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. General population data are from the U.S. Census Bureau. Data on pounds distributed are from the Arizona Food Bank Network.

7 A Pennington Biomedical Research Center study published in August 2020 shows that the correlation between food insecurity and obesity has doubled over the past 20 years in the United States.