



AzFBN Transportation Team Coordinates Distribution of Almost 39 Million Pounds in 2020–2021

Moving something from point A to point B sounds like a very simple concept—pick up here, drop off there. But what happens when you have countless loads moving from points A, B, and C to D, E, and F? Add in the fact that the cargo is produce that can spoil, and you have a recipe for potential chaos! Our produce transportation team is in a constant race against time to make sure produce makes it to destinations fresh and ready to eat. This requires nonstop, daily phone calls from **Sylvia, our Logistics Manager** (*pictured top-right*), to our drivers. While Sylvia is busy coordinating the drivers, **Andi Barrios, our Member Services Program Manager** (*pictured top-left*), is working with food banks to see who needs what and how much storage is available.

As part of the Southwest Produce Co-Op, such was and continues to be the work of the AzFBN team and its member food banks throughout 2020 and 2021 to ensure that food banks and pantries in Arizona and other Feeding America members made the most out of the donated fresh produce. This precious produce provides for families facing job loss or cuts in hours, and anyone needing support from a local food bank, the number of which during the pandemic grew two-fold.

The AzFBN team coordinated food loads originating from Nogales, Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, Yuma Community Food Bank, United Food Bank and St. Mary's Food Bank to over 21 food banks in the past year, totaling 38,626,501 pounds! **This fresh, healthy food was distributed to food banks and, from there, to agencies that help feed Arizonans at risk of hunger.** Veggies such as tomatoes, different types of squash, broccoli, bell peppers, salad, onions, and potatoes got on the road, not to mention fruits that included watermelon, grapes, honeydew melon, and cantaloupe. Some of these made it all the way to food bank partners as far as New York!

Our Members



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Hunger Action Month Review

September is a big month for everyone in hunger relief. This year, food insecurity was at the forefront of many people's minds. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light many inequalities in a starker way than may have been evident before. Many eyes were opened to the harsh realities some families endure to satisfy that basic human need—food. This year, Hunger Action Month was a time for AzFBN and our member food banks to engage people via social media, target supporters and legislators, and invite all to be a part of events that enhanced awareness of the growing number of families that struggle with food insecurity. Let's celebrate the work our member food banks accomplished during Hunger Action Month.

- **United Food Bank:** Their *Fit to Feed* challenge ran through the entire month of September, with 150 participants pledging remotely to be healthier and more active, all while fighting hunger. The monies raised are going to provide about **\$75,000 for families struggling with food insecurity**.
- **St. Mary's Food Bank:** *30 Ways in 30 Days* was a monthly calendar full of **action, activities, and events presented by Arby's** and promoted widely by St. Mary's Food Bank through various channels, e.g., TV segments, social media, etc.
- **Yuma Community Food Bank:** To bring awareness of the number of individuals and families who are food insecure, YCFB was excited to partner with Ativo Senior Living in Yuma to celebrate Hunger Action Month with the first annual *Stuff the Shuttle*. Employees, residents, and **community members came together to collect nonperishables** to help fight hunger in Yuma County.
- **Desert Mission Food Bank:** In celebration of Hunger Action Month, HonorHealth Desert Mission Food Bank partnered with the Social Services Department in the Washington Elementary School District and the staff at Ocotillo Elementary School to provide **drive-thru food distribution** for families and the surrounding community. In addition to food, information about job opportunities and financial resources was also provided.
- **Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona:** This year's *Hunger Walk* took place for an entire Saturday and in various locations, with **about 1,000 walkers participating**. Participants checked in online with the social media hashtag #hungerwalk2021 and posted from early morning through the evening hours, accompanied by their friends, kids, and pets.

Of course, this vital outreach continues, even though Hunger Action Month has wrapped up for the year. Join in the continuing conversations by subscribing to emails, following food bank social media accounts, and sharing your stories!



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Does AzFBN Give Out Grants? Not Usually!

The Arizona Food Bank Network is not a grant-making agency. But our role as a connector within the charitable food supply chain across the state positioned us as the right organization to lead a big project: **overseeing and allocating grants that totaled more than \$5 million to hundreds of food banks, food pantries, and schools.** Although we did not expect to take on the role of “grantmaker,” we were happy to meet this moment and help bring transformative funding to members and agencies in the Network, an achievement that would not have been possible without our member food banks, dollars from federal grants, and the generous support of private donors.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the past couple of years unusually challenging for food banks and the people they serve. The number of Arizonans who suffer from food insecurity jumped to 1.4 million in 2020, an increase of nearly 50 percent. Food banks across the state distributed 220 million pounds of food in 2020, also a significant increase over 2019. At the same time, **the charitable food supply faced a unique set of additional challenges**, including:

- *Low supply of food and household goods because of panic buying among consumers.*
- *Delayed production and shipping because of shutdowns and quarantines.*
- *Reductions in donations from grocery stores and food manufacturers due to high demand.*
- *Heightened competition for bulk purchasing of supplemental or hard-to-source food items.*
- *Demand for increased cold storage and distribution capacity as the USDA’s Coronavirus Food Assistance Program funneled massive amounts of food to regional food banks.*
- *In rural communities, where one small pantry serves an entire county or where the nearest grocery store is 35–40 miles away, every service provider is a vitally important lifeline.*
- *Agencies in urban communities that typically offer congregate meals had to quickly transition to offering to-go meals, food delivery programs, or drive-thru distributions.*
- *Schools and districts that had to cancel summer programs or offer them virtually needed to quickly plan for and promote continued or expanded access to school meals. Grant funding led to the addition of 268 days of service and 55,050 meals, which reached 5,493 children.*

These difficult circumstances made generous donations in support of the AzFBN’s COVID-19 Operations and Recovery Grants program vitally important.

AzFBN COVID-19 Operations and Recovery grants were used in three main ways:

- *Food purchases to help meet increased need, mitigate decreased supply within the system, and scale up distribution of cherished holiday food boxes*
- *Operations support to pay staff for increased hours to meet demand or adjust to losing volunteers, cover increased utility costs, revamp distribution models to drive-thru, to-go meals, or delivery, or add new routes to existing delivery programs*
- *Capacity investments, including purchasing or repairing equipment (freezers, refrigerators, pallet jacks, etc.), buying or upgrading vehicles to allow for delivery, adding food storage, fixing air-conditioning units, and adding awnings for outdoor distribution sites*

Thanks to the generosity and leadership of supporters and agencies and with the partnership of our member food banks, the AzFBN’s COVID-19 Operations and Recovery Grants program funded 382 grants. These grants totaled \$5,828,074 to member food banks, agencies, schools, and school districts that provide an array of services in addition to operating food pantries, congregate meal sites, and food delivery programs.

When our organization was asked again this year to lead the way on another round of granting, we happily agreed. Applications are being accepted this fall, and granting will run through at least the spring of 2022.

Hunger Relief License Plate

Have you seen this license plate when driving around Arizona, or do you even have one yourself? The Hunger Relief license plate costs \$25 (plus postage and handling) and benefits AzFBN. **Get yours when you renew your Arizona license plate** and help end hunger one “plate” at a time. A big thanks to everyone who has this special plate. See you on the road!



USDA Raises SNAP Benefits, but More Needs to Be Updated

On August 16, 2021, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that the **average Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit would increase by roughly 21 percent**—the largest benefit increase since 1979. SNAP participants will receive about \$157 per month, whereas, before the pandemic, the average monthly benefit was just \$118—or \$1.30 per meal. The increase officially took effect on October 1, so SNAP participants will see changes this month. The 21 percent boost is the result of the USDA’s review of how SNAP benefits are calculated, which demonstrated that they were too low to provide for a realistic, healthy diet for families, even with households contributing their own money toward groceries. The recent revision will help more families afford the average cost of a healthy meal.

While the SNAP increase is an excellent step in the right direction, **there are still significant barriers to access for vulnerable people facing food insecurity**. One of these barriers is the “drug felon ban.” Whether someone’s drug-related felony conviction was 2 years ago or 20, in Arizona, they must submit to random drug tests and participate in a substance abuse treatment program. Arizona is one of the 25 states that still have a modified version of the ban in place.

Tina Phalen (*pictured left*), who was released from Perryville prison in May after serving more than 13 years for a drug felony conviction, has had a difficult time finding employment, especially during the pandemic. Despite facing various challenges, Tina complied with the current requirements to access SNAP, although it took her weeks to actually receive the benefit. **“It takes a weight off my shoulders, knowing that my food is taken care of, and the little bit of money I came home with can be used to restart my life,” Tina said.** The bureaucratic hurdles in place because of the “drug felon ban” cost applicants time and money they could be using on reentry.

No one in Tina’s situation should be punished again after they have already paid their debt to society.

While the SNAP increase is great news and long overdue, work to improve this program must go on. AzFBN will continue to advocate for SNAP improvements so Tina and others like her don’t have to worry about their next meal and can focus instead on finding work and reconnecting with loved ones.

Want to Help?

Visit our website and subscribe to our email list. We’ll send you legislative action opportunities so that our elected officials and policymakers will hear your voice!

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