

NBA Grant Helps Congregation Take Food Ministry to the Street

Central Christian Church, Indianapolis, IN
COVID-19 NBA Response Grantee
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Alejandra is all business as she approaches the line of walk-up guests gathering near a table of grocery bags at the entrance of a church building. Having just finished an overnight shift at work, on this cloudy mid-June morning, the food distribution at [Central Christian Church](#) in downtown Indianapolis has caught her eye.

A clipboard-carrying woman approaches her, welcoming her into the line.

“We are trying to step up our food pantry service here,” the masked woman says. “We want to hear from our guests how we might improve things. Would you be willing to answer a few questions?”

Smiling through her own mask, Alejandra nods, “Of course!”

Since the quarantine began, even Sunday mornings have been silent on the corner where the historic building stands. Worship has moved to Zoom and Facebook accounts, as the congregation adapts to the ‘next normal.’

But every other Saturday since the quarantine began, a handful of members and friends arrive to move what has been a church-basement operation onto the sidewalk in front of the building.

Growing Need

[Indiana is one of 13 states](#) where food insecurity is higher than the national average. Marion County, which includes the City of Indianapolis, has the highest rate of food insecurity in the state, at about 22 percent of residents. That translates to 209,000 people. About 33 percent of these residents cannot get food needs met even *with* assistance.

All these numbers? Yes. They were tallied *before* the pandemic.

A grant from [National Benevolent Association](#) helped move the food pantry out of its tiny basement closet into a larger space, with new shelving, and additional freezer space. The impact will be felt even more when indoor service can be resumed. Then, clients will be back to choosing their groceries from the shelves of the pantry.

Meanwhile, the grant has come as need has doubled, providing more adequate space to store supplies. Furthermore, the new freezer means clients can be offered a frozen meat item such as hotdogs, ground beef and chicken.

When the pantry is open, we also ask guests if they'd be willing to participate in a survey. The survey is part of a grant-funded effort to engage guests in helping shape what kind of educational offerings might be added. But first, the demographics.

"What are the ages of members of your household?" comes the next question.

Alejandra pushes her purse up on her arm. She needs both hands to count.

"Well, I'm 40, my husband is 42, our daughter is 22 and her husband is 23; our other daughter is 20, our son is 15, the twins are nine and my youngest just turned four. Our grandchild is eight months. So... nine," she says, looking at her hands. "We have nine."

Behind the table, the church workers glance at each other. Distribution of food during the pandemic is limited to one bag per household, regardless of size. But nine people in one household? Two more grocery bags appear, along with a young man who offers to carry them to Alejandra's car.

When the pandemic started, households like Alejandra's merged to share resources. It's cramped, but Alejandra says the adults who lost jobs stay home with the younger ones to help with school and entertainment until new employment is found. Meanwhile, those still employed pay the bills.

What Else?

"We are considering adding educational and information services. What would be helpful to your household?" the Central member asks as each client approaches.

As rain continues to threaten, the congregation member logs dozens of requests for help that come in response to the education question. Most are beyond the scope of the little pantry: some kind of preschool program for a 4-year-old, a second-hand washer and dryer, help in finishing a high school education, housing, and more than one client shares a desire for Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings to resume. The pandemic has compounded addiction issues as stress and the loneliness of quarantine grow. AA/NA meetings at the church were the last gatherings to be cancelled, but eventually, even those critical meetings were put off, hoping to stem the infection rate of COVID-19.

Because Central has a retired social worker who supports the ministry, all the needs that fall under social services can be addressed. During the following week, the social worker will make follow-up contact with guests to redirect them to appropriate services, or answer questions.

Many food pantries saw a rise in social service needs before the pandemic. Such needs have escalated as more households struggle to respond to the pandemic-driven crush of job loss, illness, lack of health insurance, and distance learning for children that used to spend the day at school or childcare, where both food and education were supplied.

[A three-year study](#) just published in the *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* shows “even as pantries focus on distributing emergency food during the pandemic, there is value in connecting clients to social services that go beyond food.”

In fact, the report shows, providing those services reduced the level of food insecurity among clients from 70 percent to 25 percent. Folks became more self-sufficient (employment, mental and physical health, transportation, childcare, and education, were also evident at four months and again at nine months), improved their diet quality and found social support they needed.

Survey Says

Days later, the education team convenes around the results of the survey. After the social service needs are addressed, the next highest need identified is nutrition information.

So, part of the COVID-19 NBA Response Grant funding will go to developing resources that help clients learn how to make nutritious meals from the donated foods that church members and food banks provide.

One education team member is particularly jazzed about developing cooking classes for children. Teaching nutrition to children can instill self-confidence and personal agency in young people to recognize and practice healthy habits. Fortunately, [Indy Hunger Network](#), a consortium of food-based programs in the city, has resources that can support educational programming.

But many are the barriers to the aim of helping increase nutritional value for clients.

First, food bank supplies are not known for their nutritional value. A quick glance at the label often shows high sodium content in many donations. Fresh produce can be hard to come by as well, leaving processed foods as the fallback. Educating the congregation to supply donations that pay attention to nutrition will be part of the challenge. Creativity in food preparation for those who have little or no kitchen access is another hurdle to be overcome. At present, the pandemic offers no opportunity for in-person classes. So, execution of some of the plans will have to wait until the quarantine has ended.

Still, the NBA grant means that funding will not be the biggest restriction.

Solidarity in Song

As the skies clear, and the food pantry workers prepare to close up shop, one of Central's many musically gifted members arrives with his oboe. Furloughed from the Indianapolis Symphony, he understands the challenges of the times; surviving on one household income rather than two, he knows it could be worse.

He moves to an open space on the sidewalk and raises the thin, black instrument to his lips. A mournful tune floats off the brick walls of the empty church building; improvised notes find a path from his heart to the ears of the waning gathering of souls; now, mostly Central's food pantry team.

Adorned in masks and plastic gloves, they turn toward the music: deacons of a church that has left the building.

As the health and social services general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association partners with congregations, regions, general ministries, and a variety of Disciples-related health and social service

providers to create communities of compassion and care. Founded in 1887 by six women responding to the needs of the day and on their doorsteps, for more than 130 years the NBA has continued to serve "the least of these." Learn more at www.nbacaes.org.