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Pantries, groups see shortages

By Timothy O'Hara Key West Citizen

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The Metropolitan Community Church's 'Cooking with Love' program, which has delivered hot meals to needy Key Westers for the past 25 years, is among the local charities running low on food. (ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen)

Local food pantries and social service groups are beginning to see a shortage in food and monetary donations, as the coronavirus epidemic continues well into its second month in the Florida Keys, economic uncertainty remains high and the demand on food banks is unprecedented.

The SOS Foundation, the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition, the First Baptist Church of Islamorada and the local chapter of the United Way are seeing a dwindling in food and donations. In early April, a consistent flow of produce from South Florida farms was still making their way to the Keys, but two months later the growing season is winding down and the supplies are limited.

Likewise, wholesale food distributors are starting to experience shortages and disruptions in their supply chain and the non-profit food pantries and social service groups are competing with each other and large grocery chain stores for non-perishable food items.

“Even trying to buy food is difficult,” said Emily Nixon, deputy director of the SOS Foundation food pantry on Stock Island. “Across the country, there is competition for retail food in all sizes and portions. Distributors just don’t have it right now. ... We are taking it one distribution at a time and doing the best we can.”

Monetary donations are also beginning to dry up as the economic crisis continues deep into its second month with no end in sight.

The Florida Keys Outreach Coalition, which is spending about \$7,500 a week on food for the needy, has been receiving \$3,000 a week from one private donor but the donation appears to be coming to an end, Coalition Executive Director Stephanie Kaple said.

“The donations have been huge, but so has the need,” Kaple said.

The food pantries and non-profit groups have begun to be creative about the way they dole out food. FKOC staff has been splitting up 50-pound bags of rice and beans into smaller family portions. The group has also been taking large trays of eggs and splitting them into dozen-sized eggs cartons for needy families.

The United Way and SOS have begun to partner with the Monroe County School District about enrolling families into Florida Food Assistance Program (SNAP) program so the families can buy food at stores, taking the burden off the food pantries and the social service providers, said Leah Stockton, CEO of the local chapter of the United Way.

“Schools are starting with SOS sites as their own,” Stockton said. “They will then work with us at some of our feeding events and others.”

There is some good news coming. This past week, the state of Florida has partnered with state food bank network Feeding Florida on a program to feed 2.6 million people a week, Matt Massoud, who oversees the special needs registry for the county’s Social Services Department. The program consists of food boxes that can feed a family of four for five to six days.

Keys food providers are also optimistic about a new program by the United States Agriculture Department to keep farmers in business and people fed. In April, the president directed USDA to craft the \$19 billion immediate relief program to provide critical support to farmers and ranchers, maintain a food supply chain, and ensure Americans continue to receive and have access to the food they need, according to the USDA website.

Local groups have also been closely working together and with Monroe County Social Services department and with private business owners and residents on conducting food and hot meal giveaways.

Fishbusterz fish house on Stock Island and the Ocean Reef Community Foundation have partnered to bring produce from the farm fields of South Florida to the Keys. The foundation is giving financial support and Fishburterz is using its trucks to bring down the food on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, Stockton said.

The groups have tried to time food giveaways strategically so the food that is given away remains fresh, organizers said.

“Food is the most critical need,” Stockton said. “It quickly became a need and has only skyrocketed since,” Stockton said.

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