



(<https://keysnews.com>)

MEETING THE NEEDS: Organizations work together to help community

by DANIEL KELLY Key West Citizen

April 10, 2020



Roughly two dozen people including volunteers and Monroe County Public Works and Monroe County Sheriff's Office deputies gather Wednesday morning to help organize and distribute huge amounts of food from the Star of the Sea Outreach Mission. Pedestrians and drivers began showing up around 9 a.m. for the 11 a.m. start at Bernstein Park on Stock Island. (ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen)

With so many in Monroe County not receiving a paycheck the past three weeks, it's not only money that's running low in households, but also the food.

And it's that very need that's seeing so many flock to the local pantries for assistance.

Tom Callahan, a volunteer at the Star of the Sea Foundation said they are hearing people express it's the first time they've ever needed to use a food pantry.

The demand is so overwhelming that the foundation is providing 15 tons of food for each distribution at each of the two different locations in Key West and Islamorada.

They are using forklifts to handle the volume of food going through there, Callahan said.

"It's scary, because it's unsustainable [long term]," Callahan said about the incredible needs that are out there.

He said they are seeing more and more cars every time they have a food distribution.

"We're expecting 1,000 cars next Monday in Key West," Callahan predicts.

Currently, food distributions on Mondays are in Key West and Key Largo, Thursdays in Islamorada, and Wednesdays and Fridays are in Stock Island.

He is requesting to confirm distribution times on Facebook at SOSfoundationkeywest. "We are spreading it out county-wide," Callahan said.

He added they also planning on doing an additional distribution next Thursday, April 16, with their partner Farmshare at Key West City Hall, which starts at 9 a.m. and continues until the food is gone. He said it shouldn't take longer than a couple hours to empty an entire semi-truck due to so many in need.



(<https://keysnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/11987382.jpg>)

Currently, SOS food distributions are held on Mondays in Key West and Key Largo, Thursdays in Islamorada, and Wednesdays and Fridays on Stock Island.

Much of the food that's being distributed is coming down from what's been stockpiled in Miami and they're still getting produce coming down by the truckload, Callahan said, but it's the the non-perishables that's becoming the issue.

Funding is not even the major contention, as the county, city and others have really been stepping up, Callahan said.

It's just a matter of getting the food that's the main issue.

According to Callahan, the food suppliers, who typically give out maybe say four pallets of peanut butter and jelly or rice and beans are now having to scale the number of pallets way back due to the ongoing heavy demands that exist everywhere.

It's causing the food suppliers to have to ration the food, he explained, because the food chains are being interrupted.

This is causing Callahan to "think outside the box," and he's encouraging others to do likewise.

"We have to find a way to come up with creative ways to come up with food for people so dependent on the hospitality industry," he said.

Callahan continued: "Everyone needs to put on their thinking cap and come up with a viable solution that's going to work for a while. It's just a lot different time than say, after Hurricane Irma, where we could count on the calvary of aid; this is a national problem, it can't be the same, there's not enough horses in this calvary.

"I'm encouraging everyone to support the local food pantries, not just SOS, there's a whole network of food pantries between here and Key Largo and those guys are getting slammed just like we are."

It's that vision of collaboration that's starting to fill in the gaps.

Enter Stephanie Kaple, Executive Director at the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition.

Starting next week, that organization is going to be partnering with SOS to make sure everyone continues getting fed and to provide even yet more reinforcements toward the hunger that exists throughout our community.

FKOC has many of the non-perishables that SOS currently needs.

“We’re running full speed ahead with all of our programs,” said Kaple, noting that FKOC had a lot of foresight when it came to the coronavirus outbreak.

“We stocked up in advance. We looked at what was happening in China and Italy and we planned ahead. We took a little chance and we stocked up in advance, we did our Hurricane preparations.”

It’s that very foresight that got the organization ahead of the curve and is now helping respond to the growing needs that are out there.

Kaple said they used to be feeding about 120 households a month, but now they’re feeding 300 households every two days.

“We are seeing acts of kindness going forward. We’re putting out more food than we ever thought possible. If we are out one day, don’t panic, we are working on getting it filled,” Kaple said. “We are asking everyone to have patience with us, we’re bagging it as fast as we can.”

Kaple, who began with the organization as an intern back in 2003 and has worked herself into her current position, said, “There’s never been a time when every single resource we have is at high demand. We are working at neck-breaking speed. I have to give a big shoutout to our staff.”

She noted how private donors are also stepping up, including the United Way and the Ocean Reef Community Foundation.

“A week ago it looked a little bleak in terms of funding, we’d spent our funding,” she was explaining, “but now there’s a lot of financial funding on the way.”

When speaking of the people she and her staff are serving, she says, “There is lots of gratitude from them and concern and they are fearful how long this can last and long they can last in it. They’re being patient, but they are scared and it’s understandable.”

Kaple said she’s been really impressed watching everyone pulling together and adhering to the local guidelines with the understanding that the sooner everyone does, hopefully, the sooner this will all be over.

“We’re beating and crushing the curve,” Kaple said. “Who knew Key West knew how not to throw a party,” she said with a slight chuckle in her voice before pausing for a moment and adding with a strong feeling of conviction, “We’re going to get through this.”

In addition to helping feeding those in need, the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition helps shelter those needing housing.

Currently, they have 174 beds that are pretty full. Kaple explained how they are taking in people pretty much in good faith and believing that they are healthy if they say they are.

“We have to take people’s word for it,” she said, while also acknowledging the beds aren’t completely occupied as they are very cognizant of social distancing guidelines, yet they are pretty full.

“I moved to Key West for the homeless, not for the beaches,” Kaple said.

dkelly@keysnews.com (mailto:dkelly@keysnews.com)



(<https://keysnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/11987381.jpg>)



(<https://keysnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/11987382.jpg>)