

LA PORTE COUNTY

Herald-Dispatch

Rescuing food to feed the hungry in Michigan City and beyond

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Jim Musial, left, executive director of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless, and volunteers show some of the food rescued from Blue Chip Casino, Hotel and Spa when it was forced to close. Instead of being thrown away, the food was able to be donated to families in need.

Photos provided / Citizens Concerned for the Homeless

MICHIGAN CITY — Food rescue is taking leftover food from grocery stores and restaurants, food that would otherwise be thrown away, and making it available to those in need.

In the fall of 2018, the Food Bank of Northern Indiana was ready to eliminate its food rescue program in La Porte County due to cost concerns.

Citizens Concerned for the Homeless, which had been working with the Food Bank for several years, was offered the chance to assume food rescue locally, according to CCH executive director Jim Musial.

Working under the Feeding America umbrella, CCH stepped in and began putting together a program strategy – CCH’s Food Rescue Initiative was born.

CCH established an initial network of local soup kitchens, food pantries and shelters – 12 in all – to be the recipients of the food rescued from local retailers that include Walmart, Meijer, Gordon Food Service, Aldi’s and Big Lots, Musial said.

Enjoying success right out of the gate, CCH began food rescue and distribution to the groups that would have the greatest impact on getting the food where it was needed most, he said.

All told, during the pilot program in 2019, CCH distributed 144,000 pounds of food locally, using rented trucks and volunteers from its Keys to Hope Community Resource Center volunteer program. All food was delivered free of charge to the community.

“The Phase I pilot program and Phase II expansion were funded through a partnership between the Healthcare Foundation of La Porte and the Duneland Health Council, whose logos are proudly displayed on the truck they helped CCH purchase,” Musial said.

In addition to the truck acquisition, Phase II expanded the reach of the Food Rescue Initiative outside of Michigan City to other communities suffering food insecurity.

Then, shortly after Phase II began, COVID-19 changed how the Food Rescue Initiative would operate.

Musial received a call from Maria Fruth, president, and CEO of the Healthcare Foundation.

“Maria had one request” Musial said. “To make sure there is enough food, across all of La Porte County, to help feed people during this national crisis.”

Working with community partners, CCH's Food Rescue Initiative began expansion with some outside of the box thinking, he said.

"We rolled up our sleeves and got to work. The Food Rescue Initiative expanded from 13 organizations locally to 30 organizations, with distribution points in Michigan City, La Porte, Kingsford Heights, Rolling Prairie, New Carlisle, Hanna and Wanatah."

In addition to food rescue proper, CCH sought out and added bonus distribution programs to bring in more food, Musial said.

It began with a twice-a-week donation of produce from a local Chesterton distributor, which added another 6,000 to 8,000 pounds of food each month.

Then, a new partnership with the USDA Farmers to Families program added dairy and produce – an additional 50,000 pounds per month.

The Food Rescue Initiative has now added a third and fourth day to its delivery schedules to accommodate all of the new products and operates four days a week.

At the end of July, a partnership with Society of Saint Andrew will yield another 10,000 pounds per month of cheese.

And Hoosiers Feeding the Hungry will be making available another 8,500 pounds of pork for distribution under the program funded by the Healthcare Foundation for the benefit of area communities, Musial said.

"It takes a village," he said. "Through community collaborative efforts, CCH's Food Rescue Initiative distributed over 60,000 pounds in June and it is estimated July will add an additional 75,000 pounds.

"By year's end, CCH expects to see over 400,000 distributed through their program."

Musial and CCH wanted to acknowledge all funding partners that keep the program operating at expanded levels.

In addition to the HFL and Duneland Health Council, “we would really like to add a community thank you to Barker Welfare Foundation, United Way of La Porte County, Unity Foundation of La Porte County, and Michigan City Community Enrichment Corporation for their grants for operations support.”

If you would like to donate, visit CCH’s webpage at citizens4homeless.org/ and follow the donate link; or mail donations to 1005 W. 8th St., Michigan City, IN, 46360.