

MIAMI COUNTY

Pop-up pantries meet bursting demand

Food Insecurity Committee helps bridge gaps.

By Nancy Bowman
Contributing Writer

TROY — The Miami County Food Insecurity Committee was on a roll coordinating response and developing programs to address local food issues when COVID-19 hit, forcing people out of work and rapidly increasing the numbers looking for assistance obtaining food.

Using a foundation of cooperation already in place and volunteers, the committee has helped coordinate pop-up food pantries that have been held in the county and provided food that in one month attracted 1,200 households to a distribution. Before COVID-19, the distributions would attract around 300 households.

Alisha Barton, an educator with the Ohio State University Extension Service working from the Miami County office, was behind the Food Insecurity Committee's creation in 2018. She was hearing more about hunger locally, and people she was teaching were teaching out for information on accessing food staples.

"It concerned me that there are people going hungry in my neighborhood," Barton said. Through connections at OSU, she was able to help start the committee.

The mission: "To increase education, awareness and availability of healthy food choices to the residents of Miami County."

The response to the new committee, Barton said, was swift and large from a wide range of agencies such as Miami County Public Health, the Family Abuse Shelter and Health Partners Free Clinic.

"A lot of people were saying, 'We also are interested. We are hearing people talk about this (food needs) regularly,'" she said.

Soon, Aimee Shannon of Health Partners Free Clinic was on board.

Health Partners worked with students from Wright State University who were asked to talk with



Volunteers help distribute food at a pop-up food pantry in Miami County. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

the community about issues and concerns as they went about their tasks. "We were looking where can we do outreach into the community. What came back to us repeatedly was, 'We are hungry, and we don't have transportation,'" Shannon said.

The food and hunger challenges were a natural project for the Food Insecurity Committee.

One of the first issues noticed was the local food pantries were so busy working to meet their service areas' needs that they weren't talking with each other, Shannon and Barton said.

The county is fortunate to have the Meijer Distribution Center in Tipp City, but when they had extra food — carrots, bacon, coffee creamer, etc. — not all offerings were being used, Barton said.

"One of the first things we did as a council was to get all of these pantries together so now when that food comes up, one pantry will send an email to the others so they will be able to move the food

HOW TO HELP

What: Contact-free food pantry

When: Noon to 2 p.m.

Saturday

Where: Miami County Fairgrounds, 650 N. County Road 25A, Troy, Use Harrison Street entrance.

Sponsored by: Miami County Food Insecurity Committee/Shared Harvest Foodbank

More information on resources: Go online to <http://go.osu.edu/miamifood>

quickly," she said. "It has really been great. That was so simple to put into place but it just took bringing everyone to the table and starting the conversation," Barton said.

Food is a big deal for Health Partners simply because of the role it

plays in good health. "You can't be healthy if you don't have healthy food," Shannon said. To help address that issue when the COVID-19 demands on its efforts lessen, the Food Insecurity Committee is hoping to work on community gardens across the county and enhanced education so people know what they should be eating and how they can better use food available.

The committee, which has worked under the umbrella of the Miami County Food Council, also is taking steps to secure its own 501(c)(3) nonprofit designation to be able to apply for more grants for expanded projects. The Food Council focuses on local food in general.

Anyone interested in the Food Insecurity Committee and its work can contact either Shannon by email at aimeshannon@healthpartnersclinic.org or Barton by emailing barton.345@osu.edu.

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