Brownsville Baptist Church Food Pantry: Impact Far and Wide

When Martha Ann Williams gets a phone call from the church office, she cranks up her 20-year-old red Suburban for her journey to the brick building that provides help for hungry families. “I’m dedicated to the Food Pantry; it’s part of my life,” she says.

Williams, 85, is the director of the Brownsville Baptist Church Food Pantry in Brownsville, Tennessee, Haywood County, where the food insecurity rate is 12 percent of the population. No one at the church can pinpoint exactly when the Pantry started, but it has been around for more than a decade, housed in a building across from the church. The Pantry, a Mid-South Food Bank Partner Agency for 10 years, distributes about 50 food boxes three days a week and hosts a monthly Mobile Pantry.

When we decided to host the Mobile Pantry, we said we could only help 50 clients,” Williams recalled. “Then we said 75. Now we are helping over 300 families each time and it continues to grow,” she said.

The Pantry has become more valuable to the community over time. A few years ago, the Salvation Army closed at a time when more low-income housing apartments were built - many close to the Pantry. Recently, a county-organized after-school program began and the Pantry provides fresh fruit and snacks to children weekly, as well as bakery goods periodically to a nearby senior home.

Added Williams: “We know too well how valuable this Pantry is to the community, and we keep it running because of that. You get to know clients personally. You form an emotional bond with them.”

Pantry is a Backstop for Her Family

On a gray January morning, Felicia Washington stepped inside Brownsville Baptist Church Food Pantry’s lobby and rested in a chair. The visit marked the third instance in a span of 10 years that she needed some help with food. Washington, a senior citizen, is disabled. She cares for her 23-year-old daughter, Atlantis, who suffers with epilepsy, and Atlantis’s two daughters, ages three years and eleven months. She said the recent holidays were especially hard on her finances.

“I’m glad and grateful this pantry is here. It eases my mind,” she said, noting that getting the help is easy – she simply calls the church office and they put her name on the list. Washington moved to Brownsville 11 years ago from Chattanooga after her husband died.

“The food from the Pantry helps keep us from facing hunger sometimes before income assistance is available for the month,” she said. “It serves as a backstop.”

Lots of fresh produce and assorted meats like chicken are what Washington’s family enjoys. She appreciates that the Pantry offers orange juice and not sodas – especially for her grandchildren.

Nutrition is also important for her and her daughter, while the healthy options are crucial for the child and baby’s development. “And there’s red beans and rice. A pot of beans and corn bread: If I can make that, I’m happy,” she added.

Washington believes Brownsville seems to have a lot of residents in the same position as her family. “There are a lot of households where there’s a caretaker, and these families rely on assistance from the community, like the Pantry.”
As the new President & CEO of Mid-South Food Bank, I was only around for some of these accomplishments, but I am so proud to be part of an organization that did such great things for our community last year.

Cathy Pope, President & CEO

January: When thousands of local federal employees were furloughed during the government shutdown, Mid-South Food Bank responded by offering Mobile Pantry emergency food distributions. We provided food to assist nearly 2,000 IRS, TSA, FBI and U.S. Coast Guard employees and their families during the 35-day federal shutdown.

February: The annual Kids Kan school food and funds drive had 118 participating schools that collected 60,793 pounds of food and $23,000. Bartlett Elementary won first place, followed by Bellevue Middle. Both schools received $500 in school supplies, courtesy of Kroger. All schools got a Kroger-sponsored class party for the winning homeroom and Incredible Pizza Co. gift cards to all kids at the participating schools.

March: Sheffield Antique Mall’s annual Fat Tuesday party in Collierville benefited Mid-South Food Bank and our partner agency, Alpha Omega Veterans. We received a $5,000 donation to help fight hunger in the Mid-South.

April: UnitedHealthCare initiated a partnership with Mid-South Food Bank to improve the nutrition of low-income patients. Thanks to a $500,000 grant, we purchased two refrigerated, beverage-style trucks called Nutrition on Wheels (NOW) to distribute fresh produce and other nutritious foods to patients at local low-income health clinics.

May: Employees at St. Francis and Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, aided by Tenet Health Care and local Boy Scouts, held cereal drives for Mid-South Food Bank. Together they collected 2,659 pounds of cereal and breakfast foods in addition to $23,078.

June: The agricultural business community came together for the third annual Shooting Hunger event. The sporting clays fun shoot in Huntingdon, Tennessee featured 60 teams from west and middle Tennessee. It generated $21,000 for Mid-South Food Bank.

July: Mid-South Food Bank hosted a Chamber of Commerce ribbon cutting to celebrate the grand opening of its new 150,000 square-foot distribution facility at 3865 South Perkins Road. The retrofitted facility is a result of a $12.5 million capital campaign equipping Mid-South Food Bank to increase its distribution from 16 million pounds of food last year to 25 million pounds of food by 2025.

August: Cathy T. Pope began work as Mid-South Food Bank’s President & Chief Executive Officer. The former President & CEO of Feeding the Gulf Coast food bank in Theodore, Alabama, Pope follows the retirement of past president Estella Mayhue-Greer.

September: Mid-South Food Bank launched the Bare Needs Diaper Bank, a critical new program for low-income families. With a grant from the Urban Child Institute, we began collecting donations and distributing diapers for infants and toddlers in our service area.

October: Cigna Health made a commitment to the Orange Mound community in Memphis through sponsorship of a Food for Kids BackPack program at Hanley Elementary and regular Mobile Pantry distributions at the Orange Mound Community Center.

November: About 2,000 veterans received BBQ-style Thanksgiving meals with slabs of ribs from Smithfield Foods. Kroger added a large grocery bag filled with side dishes and desserts. The distribution was organized by the City of Memphis and Alpha Omega Veterans Service. Additionally, Mid-South Food Bank received a truckload of Smithfield Foods products.

December: The Action News 5 Holiday Food Drive shined bright lights on Mid-South Food Bank for the 12th year. Food donations were collected at area Gateway Tire stores for a month, Walmart in Bartlett, two Cash Saver stores and two Malco Theater locations. The drive efforts resulted in 17,842 pounds of food and nearly $50,000.
Longstanding Memphis Pantry Responds to Growing Need

A pantry organized in 1953 has gained new energy as more clients receive food assistance. Serving the 38112 Memphis zip code, St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry at St. Michael Catholic Church serves nearly 280 households per month at its Saturday morning distributions – up from about 100 not too long ago, according to Pantry director, Patrick Denham. “Volunteers pre-pack boxes on Friday night and we set up laptops to be ready for check-in.”

“The people who come looking for help inspire us,” says volunteer Claudia Baker, who greets and registers clients when they come for food. “They have great spirits, despite facing some serious adversities.”

Many clients are older and disabled, but some are single parents. Others are facing crisis like two clients who recently sought the help from the Pantry due to house fires.

Disabled Veteran Finds Food and Hope at Pantry

Michael Kuykendall, 64, is a disabled Vietnam veteran living with his service dog, Kelo. Recently, caretaker Linda O’Hara escorted him to the St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry, at St. Michael Catholic Church, to help him receive some much-needed food.

Kuykendall said it has been 10 years since a life-threatening incident altered his life. He was standing under a tree in South Memphis when lightning struck the ground nearby.

“There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. The lightning bolt lit my shoes on fire and knocked me down,” he said.

He left the hospital four months later, but was unable to return to his job as a manager at the University of Tennessee Health Center due to permanent spinal injury. The Air Force veteran has been disabled since, relying on a cane or wheelchair and help from his sister who lives with him. Unfortunately, she recently suffered a stroke, so O’Hara wanted to make sure he had access to food. “I’ve tried to get to the store on the bus with my dog, but it doesn’t work,” he said.

At the Food Pantry volunteers helped fill a box with cereal, frozen meat, fresh produce, snacks and other goods. Kuykendall said this first visit to St. Michael’s would not be his last, and that prospect eased his worries.

“I’m not picky; I’m really grateful for the help,” says Kuykendall.
MealConnect from Feeding America makes it easy to connect excess food from donors such as restaurants, caterers, hotels and convenience stores to local Mid-South Food Bank agencies that serve people facing hunger.

The MealConnect app enables participating food service organizations to snap a photo of excess prepared food and download it on the app. Volunteers with the app are immediately notified and can respond to transport the available food to a Mid-South Food Bank Partner Agency. MealConnect is available from any smartphone, tablet or computer to make an immediate impact in the community. It is free for all users and donations are tax-deductible. Mid-South Food Bank maintains strict food-safety standards to ensure food is handled properly by our volunteers and partners.

Become a Volunteer Driver
You can volunteer as a MealConnect Driver. You will receive food safety training and access to equipment to safely transport food. The MealConnect app alerts you when a pick-up is available from a donor location. You pick up the donation and drop off the food at a community partner location designated by Mid-South Food Bank.

For more information on becoming a food donor or volunteer driver, visit the MealConnect page on our website: https://www.midsouthfoodbank.org/meal-connect or contact Robert Onstad, 901-373-0405, ronstad@midsouthfoodbank.org. Be part of the solution to food waste.

Thanks to MealConnect, volunteers in the kitchen at St. Vincent DePaul Food Mission were busy organizing and refrigerating 48 large trays filled with cooked food from the Mempho Music Festival at Shelby Farms Park.