

Spotlight on the Safety Net

A Community Collaboration

The Food Bank's Role in Disaster Relief and Historic Response to Hurricane Florence

The Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina (the Food Bank) is a nonprofit organization that has provided food for our friends and neighbors facing hunger in 34 counties in Central and Eastern North Carolina for 40 years. The Food Bank is an affiliate member of Feeding America, the nation's leading domestic hunger relief charity [1]. Our food distribution programs and child nutrition programs are based on national models.

We work every day to provide food to people in need while building solutions to end hunger in our communities. The Food Bank began operations in 1980 and now partners with a network of more than 900 partner agencies such as soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters, and programs for children and adults through distribution facilities in Durham, Greenville, New Bern, Raleigh, the Sandhills (Southern Pines), and Wilmington.

The Food Bank works across the food system to provide access to nutritious food that nourishes families, children, seniors, and individuals. Through partnerships, education, and programs, the Food Bank empowers communities to overcome hunger, creating an environment where all North Carolinians thrive.

We have also been responding to both national disasters and major weather events since 1996, including Hurricanes Fran, Floyd, and Matthew. The Food Bank works in conjunction with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Feeding America network, the Red Cross, and our partner agencies to collect and deliver needed food and non-food essentials to victims in affected areas.

In the span of weeks in 2018, Hurricanes Florence and Michael created a dire humanitarian crisis in more than half of our service area. In addition to partnering with other experts in disaster relief, the Food Bank activated our Emergency Action Team as soon as we knew Florence could impact North Carolina. We had at least a week to prepare prior to

landfall, which allowed us to bring in extra product and stock partner agencies ahead of time. When Florence made landfall on September 14, it created a massive storm surge and record flooding that destroyed homes and damaged roads, cutting off citizens from their communities. This meant our trucks were cut off for a time as well, however many of our partner agencies were able to continue operating because we supplied them prior to the storm.

We brought help in the form of staff from sister food banks in the Feeding America network and acquired additional warehouse space to house extra food and supplies. The Food Bank's partner services staff identified partner agencies to serve as frontline emergency food providers. After the storm passed, the staff contacted those agencies and checked to make sure they could still operate. Our volunteer team immediately prioritized packing disaster boxes, which contained about 20 meals worth of non-perishable food items. We also sourced products based on the needs of each affected community and the stage of recovery. After the weather event first happened, this included dry goods like granola bars and other snacks that don't have to be cooked, and as recovery began, also included cleaning products. Because school was out due to the storms, our programs team activated the Summer Food Service Program, which provided kids with meals. In addition, our communications team pushed out information about disaster preparation and emergency food providers via our website, email, and social media accounts.

The Food Bank's response to Florence and

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Michael was our largest yet, with 15 million pounds of food and non-food essentials being distributed to 31 of our 34 counties [2]. Previously, the Food Bank's largest disaster response had been for Hurricane Floyd in 1999, after which we distributed 5.3 million pounds (internal data). For the first time ever, the Food Bank opened a pantry in hard-hit Jones County. The pantry started out serving 100 people each day of operation and a year later was still serving 50 people per day.

After each disaster, the Food Bank's crisis team meets to debrief about how we can adjust the disaster plan to better respond to these events in the future. Following the September 2018 storms, our team began to focus more on how we can help our communities to be more resilient in the face of weather events. The hope is that the Food Bank can help reduce recovery time for our friends and neighbors throughout our service area following a natural disaster.

As we shift our inventory and operations to meet the ever-changing need and prepare ourselves for the 2020 hurricane season, funds are the resource we need most. They allow us to tailor our operation and find innovative ways of distrib-

uting food in the coming days and weeks. The Food Bank is committed to serving those in need for the long haul, and we're very thankful for the trust that's placed in us. **NCMJ**

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