

## Climbing With Hope: How Food Banks and Community Came Together in COVID-19

*Hannah Randall*

Most of us are one or two crises away from needing help. One cancer diagnosis, one car accident, one layoff, one divorce can throw our lives into chaos. At the height of COVID-19, many people were forced to turn to community organizations for help for the very first time.

Nestled beside the Swannanoa River in the mountains of Western North Carolina is the Mountain Area Nutritional Needs Alliance (MANNA) FoodBank. Created in 1982 by community volunteers, MANNA began by distributing potatoes to people in need out of the basement of the non-profit Eliada Children's Home.

Nearly 40 years later, MANNA is a thriving community-based movement of thousands of volunteers who give what they can to involve, educate, and unite people in the work of ending hunger in Western North Carolina. MANNA is a member of a network of 200 food banks nationwide that work together as Feeding America to feed hungry people today and prevent hunger tomorrow [1].

The volume of research about the intersecting fields of food insecurity and health is ever-growing. It is now more broadly known that a lack of reliable access to healthy food not only leads to significant emergency department and inpatient hospitalizations, but also translates to negative health outcomes for kids, adults, and seniors alike [2, 3].

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, MANNA distributed over 20 million pounds of food annually to people facing hunger with the help of a network of 240 partner pantries, shelters, and schools. Additionally, MANNA partners with clinics and medical practices across the mountain region to address the intersection of hunger and health, getting food and nutrition assistance to people who need it the most.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the number of

people in urgent need of food drastically increased. In the past year, MANNA served an average of over 100,000 people per month, a more than 60% increase over pre-pandemic numbers [4]. Access to food assistance can stretch people's minimal financial resources for basic needs like utilities and medicine and help to stabilize a family's income. Communities of color and low-income people in Western North Carolina historically experience high rates of food insecurity and were especially affected by the pandemic. MANNA worked in these communities to address the acute needs while working on a collective state and national level to prevent hunger tomorrow [5].

### Outreach Efforts

MANNA collaborated with community stakeholders to identify underserved Hispanic/Latinx communities and to deliver vital food supplies. This group of community leaders—social workers, priests, other nonprofits, and legal services—identified communities in crisis and established rapid response plans. MANNA sent its mobile pantry directly to communities without an established pantry, delivering staples like fresh produce, rice, beans, and tortillas. MANNA collaborated with other organizations to provide other goods and services, including bilingual vaccine information, laundry detergent, cloth masks, and prepared meals. Neighborhood leaders provided volunteer assistance at distribution and coordinated home deliveries to people in need.

Buncombe County's housing authority collaborates with MANNA to distribute food to affordable and public housing sites. Community Engagement Markets (CEMs) are pop-up markets offering assistance with chronic dis-

ease management, employment, access to healthy food, education, and more coordinated by market leaders from local human services organizations. Due to the impact of the pandemic, MANNA increased its participation in CEMs, providing extra staffing and communicating more frequently with the markets' leaders. These efforts led to the distribution of 78% more food to these communities than in the prior year (internal data, MANNA).

When the Qualla Boundary (the official name for the territory of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in Western North Carolina) closed in March 2020 to contain COVID-19, the food intended to serve the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians within the boundary could not reach the community. In December 2020, Tribal Food Services called MANNA with an urgent need, and MANNA shifted operations to serve 1674 individuals within the boundary in a single event.

The acute need for food across communities was compounded by a nearly 50-year record rise in food costs in April 2020 [6]. To prevent chronic hunger, MANNA works with Feeding America and other organizations to advocate for policies that would stabilize people facing hunger. This collaborative advocacy effort led to increases in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and a federal agricultural product purchase incentive to stabilize farmers and families and provide other equipment and infrastructure support to feed the record need [7].

Where do we go from here? After seeing the myriad ways that people across North Carolina have addressed hunger in this crisis, I hope this next chapter is the real chance for advocates, elected officials, and communities to come together around shared values. If we work together, there are real opportunities for better health for kids needing nourishment, for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren and need some assistance, and for senior citizens who are isolated. Together, we can show up for veterans who have sometimes been through unimaginable circumstances, and for moms and dads working full

time jobs without insurance when their child breaks her arm. My hope is that we find ways to show up for people in what is sometimes their darkest hour while developing sustainable ways for a brighter and less food-insecure future for us all. NCMJ

**Hannah Randall, MBA** chief executive officer, MANNA FoodBank, Asheville, North Carolina.

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Address correspondence to Hannah Randall, MANNA Foodbank, 627 Swannanoa River Rd, Asheville, NC 28805 (hrandall@mannafoodbank.org).

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