

Dane County & Second Harvest: Mark anniversary of initiative to address food insecurity as new wave of need begins

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This spring marks the beginning of the fourth year of an innovative county-initiated partnership with Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin that was born out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, Dane County, Second Harvest, and its network of local food pantries and meal sites have provided millions of pounds of freshly grown and locally-sourced food to thousands of families in Dane County.

Dane County Executive Parisi's budget includes \$6 million to sustain the successes of Farm to Foodbank in 2023. The funding comes at a critical time, given recent announcements that temporary increases to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known as SNAP, or FoodShare in Wisconsin)—benefits designed to help families cope with the financial impacts of the pandemic—will sunset at the end of February.

"The combination of the pandemic and national economic factors resulted in almost 40,000 Dane County residents facing food insecurity last year," County Executive Joe Parisi said. "Farm to Foodbank was created to meet the earliest challenges we saw in COVID, and as time has gone by, it's clearly emerged as the model partnership to meet emergency needs while supporting the local economy. To help weather the economic impact created by the end of the extra FoodShare benefits, we encourage residents to make use of the many area food resources who receive food from the Farm to Foodbank initiative."

SNAP assists more than 41 million Americans in purchasing healthy food. Following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Congress passed a 15% boost to SNAP to help low-income families and individuals make ends meet during uncertain times. With that boost now coming to an end, benefits will return to pre-pandemic levels. Yet, inflation has caused food prices to remain high. An estimated 20,000 Dane County residents will be impacted by this change, and food pantries are expecting a surge in the number of people seeking assistance.

How will the end of extra FoodShare benefits impact the Dane County community? Roughly \$5,391,844 will be lost in benefits per month (\$64,702,128 per year). The estimated negative economic impact per month will be \$9,705,319 (\$116,463,830 per year). These calculations are based on the estimation that each \$1 that comes into Dane County in benefits generates approximately \$1.80 in local economic activity. In addition, Feeding America estimates that the cost of a “meal” in Dane County is \$3.71. When you divide the lost benefits per month (\$5,391,844) by meal cost, that means approximately 1,453,327 meals will be lost each month (17,439,927 meals per year).

“This initiative connects families facing food insecurity with nutritious food grown and produced right here in Dane County, with the added benefits of strengthening our local food system by supporting local farmers and producers and reinvesting in our local economy,” said Michelle Orge, president & CEO of Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin. “While there is still work to be done to expand Farm to Foodbank throughout Southwestern Wisconsin, we’re incredibly grateful for the foundation we’ve built with Dane County and their continued support.”

At the outset of the pandemic, Dane County officials approached Second Harvest to co-design a program to increase the supply of locally-grown nutritious food into the emergency food system while providing a market for Dane County food producers who, at the time, were facing devastating setbacks due to the loss of their traditional sales and distribution outlets. Those efforts became Dane County and Second Harvest’s Farm to Foodbank initiative.

“Our partnership with Second Harvest is vital to the success of our food pantry, and in the last three years, with the unprecedented demand on our pantry, the free produce, dairy, and meat we’ve received from the Farm to Food Bank initiative has

ensured our customers have access to high-quality fresh foods,” said Goodman Center CEO Letesha Nelson. “We even started a fresh produce stand for our customers to pick out fruits and vegetables as they wait to shop the pantry.”

Since 2020, the county has invested \$20 million to acquire and distribute well over 12 million pounds of locally-sourced food. In 2022 alone, the initiative supported 3.8 million meals through 128 food pantries and meal sites in Dane County. Additionally, 53 Dane County food producers received a fair price for their food, which helped create a positive local economic impact of over \$12 million.

“This partnership exemplifies the good that can result when people come together to look for ways to address challenging circumstances,” Parisi said. “This is keeping people who struggle to make ends meet fed and creating income for our local growers and farmers. I’m continually grateful to Second Harvest and each one of the partner organizations for their persistence and creativity in helping us support our neighbors.”

In addition to the Farm to Foodbank initiative, Executive Parisi announced today that Dane County is awarding \$2 million in local emergency food pantry assistance grants to:

- Wisconsin Youth Company | \$50,021
- Mission Nutrition DeForest | \$50,021
- McFarland Community Food Pantry | \$50,000
- Sun Prairie Emergency Food Pantry | \$95,236
- Extended Hands Pantry | \$50,021
- Oregon Area Food Pantry | \$50,021
- Lussier Community Education Center | \$67,627
- Irwin A. and Robert D. Goodman Community Center | \$50,564
- Deerfield Community Center, Inc. | \$50,021
- JFMJ Academy | \$50,021
- Neighbors Helping Neighbors | \$50,021
- Heights Unlimited Community Resource Center | \$50,000
- Vera Court Neighborhood Center | \$50,021
- District Council Of Madison, Society Of St. Vincent De Paul | \$223,349
- The River Food Pantry | \$111,686

- Badger Prairie Needs Network | \$125,643
- Community Action Coalition For South Central Wisconsin | \$530,844
- Middleton Outreach Ministry | \$201,842