

# THE RIVER FOOD PANTRY ASSISTS RECORD NUMBER STRUGGLING WITH FOOD INSECURITY

BY MICHAEL POPKE



As the cost of living continues to rise, more Dane County households depend on The River Food Pantry for food assistance.

Last year, The River Food Pantry — south-central Wisconsin's busiest food pantry — served nearly 13,000 people facing food insecurity in Dane County: adults, seniors, veterans, children, and those without permanent homes.

And The River (as it's affectionately known) is on pace to assist even more individuals and households in 2023. Through August, the number of families that registered at The River for the first time this year was up 42% over the first eight months of 2022.

"It might be your neighbor, or somebody in your own family, who needs assistance, and you may not even know about it," says Rhonda Adams, executive director of The River, which was founded in 2006 and operates out of an 11,000-square-foot space at 2201 Darwin Road on Madison's north side. "It's human nature to judge, but since working here, I've learned that we can't judge. When I walk outside to our curbside distribution line, there might be somebody in a Cadillac or a BMW. Not long ago, I talked to someone who said, 'Please don't judge me by the car I'm driving. My neighbor allowed me to borrow it for three hours, and this is the first place I'm stopping because I need food.'"

The pandemic and inflation have exacerbated expenses, and many individuals and families are grappling with increased costs of groceries, housing, gas, and childcare. The message Adams and her team of 26 employees — plus more than 2,300 volunteers who logged 37,600 hours in 2022 — want to send people experiencing food insecurity? "It's okay to come to a food pantry," she stresses. "Use your money to pay other bills. We're here to take some of the burden off food expenses."

Consider what The River provided in 2022:

- 2.9 million pounds of food and supplies;
- 80,022 freshly prepared, to-go meals for entire households;
- 29,091 mobile meals in 18 low-income neighborhoods;
- 4,453 grocery deliveries to the homebound; and
- 2,397 online grocery orders.

Thousands of donors, both public and private, individuals and businesses — including National Guardian Life Insurance in downtown Madison, which has been a financial supporter of The River since 2015 — help make The River's work possible.

What sets The River apart from many other food pantries in the area is its unique network of eight food access programs:

- 1. Curbside Groceries:** The River offers free curbside pickup of groceries, which are loaded into people's vehicles by staff and volunteers. Choices include a la carte selections and the prepackaged "everything option." The River remains one of the few food pantries in the area to retain curbside service, according to Adams.
- 2. Family At-Home Meals (FAM):** This curbside meal program provides to-go meals for everyone in a household. Prepared by The River's professionally trained chefs and volunteers, these meals include meat and vegetarian options, along with a side salad and fresh fruit.
- 3. Munch:** This mobile meals program delivers free and healthy meals to children and adults Tuesdays through Saturdays in 24 low-income areas throughout Madison and Fitchburg.
- 4. River Delivers:** Twice a month, homebound clients are able to use this free, contactless food delivery program. Deliveries include

groceries and other essential items.

**5. ePantry:** Once a month, households have the option to order groceries online and select from a variety of healthy and nutritious food, including culturally inclusive items and special dietary options such as gluten-free, low-sodium, and sugar-free. Groceries can be picked up or delivered.

**6. Pantry Express:** The River offers a condensed selection of curbside groceries every other Saturday. No registration is required.

**7. Food Now (Nights or Weekends):** The River's newest program allows free access to an onsite emergency food locker whenever curbside distribution is closed. Each of the 10 lockers contains a short-term supply of shelf-stable foods.

**8. Redistribution Partnerships:** The River is the first redistribution organization of Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin, meaning it can redirect food sourced from the food bank to a variety of local organizations throughout Dane County to reach more people in need.

Financial support of The River's programs is critical to the organization's operation, but so are volunteers. "Check us out," Adams says. "Once people walk in this door to volunteer, they're hooked. They put away their preconceived notions about who comes to a food pantry. The River is a magical place where staff and volunteers work together to serve our community."

Adams began working at The River more than a decade ago. She's still there and busier than ever. "I feel that I'm maybe making a little bit of a difference by the work that we get to do," Adams says. "And, you know, our work is not done. We can do without a lot of things — food is not one of them." ■



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