

The Community Pantry receives nearly 28,000 tons of food

Written by By Carli Mortensen Communications Director at the Gallup New Mexico Stake The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Friday, 29 December 2023 00:00



The Community Pantry in Gallup received a semi-truck donation of almost 28,000 tons of food Dec. 20 from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That's enough food to provide one meal to everyone in Gallup, Chief Operating Officer Hilda Garcia-Kendall said.

The donation from the Church will help supplement almost all of the Pantry's different programs to decrease food insecurity. The Pantry serves more than 3,500 families twice a month. They provide more than 40,000 meals annually. The Gallup location serves McKinley County residents, where about 34% of the population lives below the poverty line. That's 23% more than the national average.

On December 20, volunteers from the Church also helped prepare commodity boxes for the Emergency Food Assistance Program, which distributes food to more than 3,500 families and 6,500 individuals monthly, twice a month. They assembled bags filled with ready-to-eat food items for the Food for Kids program, which teams up with schools to reduce food insecurity for local students. It serves more than 800 children in 27 schools by providing nutritious food to take home over the weekend when they might be more vulnerable to hunger.

McKinley County is ranked number one in child hunger in New Mexico, and Cibola County ranks number three. New Mexico is ranked 49th in the U.S. for child hunger, according to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap report.

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The Church volunteers also loaded food for local non-profit agencies and churches, such as those doing outreach to those who are homeless. Agencies in this program can participate in getting food to distribute to their clients. This helps to extend the reach of the Pantry. In 2022, more than one in six people received food from a charitable food distribution, according to the Map the Meal Gap report.

Garcia-Kendall stated it has been very difficult lately. The Pantry depleted all of its food during COVID-19.

“The reason for that was because we were assisting everybody. It didn’t matter what your income was. As long as you needed the help, please get in line, and we would assist you,” she said. “But because every Food Bank across the nation has also followed this process, it has depleted everything that the United States had, so it is taking a while to get back to where we were, and they have said that it is going to be at least five years after COVID before we are going to be okay again, and we are still in COVID. ...”

The Map the Meal Gap report found that one in three people facing hunger is unlikely to qualify for SNAP, the nation’s first line of defense against hunger. Food banks like The Community Pantry have several programs that aren’t income-based and help to fill the gap SNAP and other low-income programs leave.

The donation from the Church will go into all of the Pantry’s programs, except the garden programs, Executive Director Alice Perez said.

“That’s one thing that’s nice about donated goods. We are not limited as to who we can service with them because everyone has the right to eat,” she said.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also donated this year so that The Community Pantry can install a Hope Garden at its new Grants location. The Hope Garden in Grants will be modeled after the garden in Gallup, which offers garden box rentals, a seed exchange program, gardening education, and fresh produce for clients. Additionally, the Church purchased a tractor that can be used in the Hope Gardens at both locations.

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Groundbreaking research about missing meals in New Mexico is now available for the first time through support from the New Mexico Collaboration to End Hunger and funding from PNM. The groundbreaking research from the New Mexico Collaboration to End Hunger discovered that low-income New Mexicans miss over a million meals yearly. This means that vulnerable families, children, seniors, and individuals do not have enough food in their homes, according to The Food Depot, based in Santa Fe.

One in four Native Americans live in poverty, and approximately one in five Native Americans are food insecure, according to the Census Bureau. However, within the Navajo Nation, the food insecurity rate is 76.7%, according to a study published by Public Health Nutrition.

The study concluded that “[food] insecurity rates on the Navajo Nation are the highest reported to date in the USA and are likely attributable to the extremely high rates of poverty and unemployment.”

The USDA classifies the Navajo Nation Reservation as a food desert as there are only 13 grocery stores that offer fresh fruit, vegetables, and basic supplies.

The Community Pantry is part of the Feeding America network. Nationwide, 48 Native Nations and tribal communities are in an area served by a food bank in the Feeding America network. The Community Pantry in Gallup and Grants serves several of those communities and is on the frontlines to help reduce food insecurity among Native Americans.

“Our prophet, Russel M. Nelson, is really encouraging us to do more to help community members, regardless of beliefs or church affiliation,” Gallup Stake President Bron Shaheen said. “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints recognizes how much good Alice and The Community Pantry do to help our community, and we feel blessed for the opportunity to work with them.”

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