

NOURISHING NEWS

FROM HELPING HARVEST **Spring 2022**

From the President

Hello Friends!

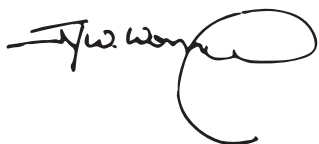
I am very excited to share with you that over the past six months our Board of Directors has undertaken a strategic planning process, trying to determine the best way for us to meet our mission in what is a very different environment than any we have seen before. While the final elements of that plan will not be determined for another month, the Board's work articulating the direction of Helping Harvest has truly been nothing short of visionary. I am so appreciative and impressed by their dedication, their wisdom, and their effort in this work. We are all very fortunate to have their leadership in our community, especially those in Berks and Schuylkill Counties who rely on Helping Harvest to meet the nutritional needs of their families.

We will make formal announcements about our new vision when the plan is completed later this Spring. However, I just cannot contain my excitement! As such I would like to share with you four strategic elements that have emerged, around which we will organize our work for the next several years. They are:

- Develop programs to direct as much food as we are able to meet the nutritional needs of children during their peak brain-development years, beginning in-utero and continuing through the early elementary school years.
- Build a service-delivery network that delivers fresher and healthier food to seniors in our community, both by expanding the PA Senior Food Box Program in Berks and Schuylkill Counties and through new initiatives.
- Identify ways to provide frozen, healthy, heat-and-eat ready meals to our clients, particularly for seniors and families.
- Work with our 300+ food distribution partners---pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, snack programs, school programs, Mobile Markets, etc. --to increase the number of households we serve, increase the nutritional value and freshness of our food, and improve the efficiency in which we serve our community.

As ever, none of this would be possible without your support. Thank you so much for your kindness. TOGETHER we can continue to ensure that children, adults and seniors in Berks and Schuylkill Counties do not go to bed hungry!

Humbly yours,



Jay Worrall, President



Board and staff leadership participate in a strategic planning meeting

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If you have any comments or questions, please contact the editor.

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Meeting the Needs of Children

- Helping Harvest has long had a commitment to feeding the hungry children of our community. Proper nutrition at an early age has a profound effect on physical, mental and cognitive growth in children. Our Weekender Program was piloted at two partner sites in 2004 and now serves more than 2,000 in-need children weekly at 60 schools throughout Berks and Schuylkill counties. Produce 4 Kids held its first distribution in 2010 and has since distributed more than one million pounds of healthy foods to students in the Reading School District.

To sharpen this critical focus for the future, Helping Harvest recently created the position of Youth Programs Manager. Krista Renenger, who previously served as Agency and Program Relations

Coordinator, was appointed to fill this new role. In this position, Krista will continue the ambitious expansion of the Weekender Program the Programs Department began in 2021. As part of Helping Harvest's nearly completed strategic plan, we have set a goal of supporting Weekender partner sites at all primary and middle schools in our two counties.

Krista has also been working on recharging our Produce 4 Kids program, which unfortunately had to go on a hiatus while the students of the Reading School District were virtually attending school. However, with the students back in the buildings, the program is once again distributing fresh and healthy produce and dairy items to the students. Two to three distributions are occurring each week at Reading elementary schools on a rotating basis. This program offers Helping Harvest a wonderful resource to quickly put donated perishable foods in the hands of children in need while the foods are still at peak freshness.

In a further effort to support nourishing children during the crucial brain development years (pre-natal to age 8), Krista will be outreaching to the medical community, educational institutions and other community organizations to help engage the Berks and Schuylkill communities to meet the needs of food insecure infants and children. Through these connections, we are looking to: bring a program similar to the Weekender to Head Starts and daycare centers; work with pediatrician offices on referrals for food insecure families; and promote SNAP benefits for families with young children and WIC for mothers with infants and young children.



A copy of the official registration and financial information of Helping Harvest may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free within Pennsylvania **1-800-732-0999**. Registration does not imply endorsement.

Weekender Program Experiences Rapid Growth

While the COVID pandemic severely altered how all of our programs operated, perhaps the one most affected was our Weekender Program. As schools went virtual in March 2020, distributing the weekly bags filled with nourishing foods for local students in need became impossible. Even as most schools returned to at least a “hybrid” schedule for the 2020-21 school year, reaching these students was still difficult as many children remained virtual and some Weekender school sites chose to go on hiatus. Pre-pandemic, we operated 18 Weekender school sites in Berks and Schuylkill counties. For the 2020-21 school year, that number dipped to 10.

However, thanks to schools enthusiastically rejoining the program for this school year, and an aggressive expansion effort by our Programs Department, we are now supplying weekly bags at 60 school sites in our two counties. This growth means we are now providing more than 2,000 bags of food weekly in 17 of our local school districts. Future goals call for hosting the program in all primary and middle schools in our service area.

This impactful growth is only possible because of the generosity of the individuals, corporations, and foundations that generously support this program through financial donations. On behalf of the young children who are receiving much needed nourishment, we thank you!



Volunteers packing Weekender bags at Helping Harvest

Nourishing Our Senior Neighbors

Nearly 20% of the people served by Helping Harvest are seniors, the most vulnerable of our neighbors. In addition to providing nourishment through food pantries and Mobile Markets, we also offer the federally supported Pennsylvania Senior Food Box Program, which works to improve the health of low-income seniors by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA foods. The Senior Food Boxes are helpful to the recipients' budgets and health care by providing a supplement to the seniors' normal purchases, in an effort to ensure they receive foods of high nutritional value. The USDA orders a variety of food items for each category, keeping in mind the nutritional needs of seniors. Volunteers pack the food boxes at our warehouse over several days; Helping Harvest then distributes them to 85 senior housing facilities as well as participating partner agencies.

Over the past two years, there has been a surge in demand for food assistance, and seniors are no exception. Nearly 1,900 low-income individuals residing in Berks and Schuylkill counties now receive Senior Food



Loading a Senior Food Box into a participant's car

Boxes each month, with more on the waiting list. Helping Harvest is working diligently to expand this program to accommodate all the seniors in need throughout our community. Our efforts include an increase of community outreach as well as distributing Senior Food Boxes at more partner agencies, to make it more convenient for those we serve.

If you know a senior in need, please contact Lori Lowery, Helping Harvest's Senior Services Manager, at 610-926-5802 ext. 203, to inquire about receiving an application to participate in this program.

Agency Feature – Calvary Bible Fellowship Church

Welcome to our newest partner, Calvary Bible Fellowship Church! Started this March, their drive-through pantry is bringing much needed food assistance in an area of growing need. Calvary's pantry will provide food assistance to those living in the Wilson and Conrad Weiser School Districts, concentrating on those residing in Sinking Spring, Wernersville and South Heidelberg. Their food distributions, taking place the third Saturday of each month, will be most helpful to working families who are unable to attend a weekday pantry. At their first distribution held on Saturday, March 19, nineteen local families were served. We have already received positive feedback from one of Calvary's clients, who commented on how she received a wonderful selection of food and how friendly and efficient the volunteers were.

We are grateful that our friends at Calvary Bible Fellowship have initiated this program to feed their neighbors in need, and deeply appreciate their help in the fight against hunger.



Produce 4 Kids Hits a Milestone!

Produce 4 Kids is now in its 12th year, and like many of our programs, is growing rapidly. Initiated to provide increased access to fresh foods to elementary children in the Reading School District, this program provides a bag of fruits, vegetables, and/or dairy items to every student at dismissal time. Popular with both kids and parents, this program puts nutritious foods directly into the hands of each child--up to 850 children at each distribution. Often, families are introduced to healthy new foods that they might not have tried, otherwise.

Due to virtual schooling, Produce 4 Kids was dormant for the 2020-2021 school year. Now that the program has been revived, the program currently distributes food at 2 to 3 schools per week. The ability to expand this program is only possible due to our recently completed cold storage expansion project. Our increased capacity allows us to store and distribute more purchased and donated fresh foods than ever before. Tackling nutritional inequality, through our Produce 4 Kids and other programs, is critical to building a stronger community.

Since its start in March 2010, Produce 4 Kids has provided more than one million pounds of nourishing food to local children. We are proud of the continued success of this program, and thank you for being part of it. Your support is instrumental in achieving our goal of making fresh and healthy foods accessible to all, and improving the physical and mental health of our youngest neighbors in need.



Cold Storage Project Complete

When construction began last summer, Helping Harvest eagerly awaited the day our new cold storage units would be ready to be filled with healthy, fresh and frozen foods, intended for the plates of local families in need. The increased demands for food assistance brought on by COVID pushed our existing cold storage well past its capacity.

After many months of construction, we're happy to report the project is complete and the new cold storage units are helping us better fulfill our mission: feeding the hungry of Berks and Schuylkill counties.

The two new units – each with the capacity of serving as a freezer or refrigerator – can store up-to a total of 250 pallets of food. This addition increased our previous cold storage

capacity by 50% – allowing us to pursue and accept significantly larger donations and purchases of perishable food products. The produce, dairy and meats stored in the new units will help us not only supply healthy foods to the food pantries and meal programs we support; but, also place these highly desirable foods into the hands of families, children and seniors in need through our Mobile Markets, Produce 4 Kids and Mobile Direct programs.

This crucial project was made possible by a \$450,000 Impact Grant from the United Way of Berks County, a matching gift from an anonymous local donor, as well as the generosity of many other local individuals, companies and foundations.



Pound Per Person Challenge

The Reading Hospital Magnet Champions Team partnered with Helping Harvest to coordinate the 11th annual Pound Per Person Food Challenge at Reading Hospital. All hospital employees were challenged to donate one pound of food per person – with a goal to collect 6,000 pounds total to support Helping Harvest and the charitable food programs we supply.

Generous and caring employees surpassed that goal by donating 8,800 pounds of food!

More than 90 departments participated and donated food staples such as canned goods, cereals, pastas, personal hygiene items and more. Two teams were recognized for making the largest per capita and largest overall donations. The Reading Hospital Center for Public Health, a team of 13 individuals, collected 308.7 pounds (23.75 pounds per person). The R3 East Medical nursing team of 50 individuals collected a total of 483.9 pounds.

"The past two years have been difficult for all of us," said Rosemary Wurster, DNP, RN, MPH, NEA-BC, CEN, Reading Hospital Chief Nursing Officer. "I am so proud that after everything our team members have been through, they wanted to support Helping Harvest to ensure that the under-served families and individuals in our community have access to healthy food."

Thank you to the staff of Reading Hospital for your dedication and support!



Dunkin' Helps us Roast Hunger

The 11th Annual Roast Hunger campaign was a success! For every large coffee purchased from local Dunkin' franchises during the campaign (which ran from Thanksgiving to mid-December), \$1 was donated to Helping Harvest. This year's contribution was an impressive \$10,000! The donation will allow us to provide 100,000 meals to our neighbors in need throughout Berks and Schuylkill counties.



Over the last eleven years, the Roast Hunger campaign has generated more than \$2 million in donations for the five food banks in the Greater Philadelphia region. We are grateful for the continued support of Dunkin', their community-minded franchisees, and to all who participated in the Roast Hunger campaign. Thank you for helping us fight hunger in our community.

Thank you Sandy!

Sandy Brown recently marked an extraordinary milestone--her 3,000th volunteer hour served! Sandy, who has been a Helping Harvest volunteer since January of 2017, is an integral part of our daily operations, assisting in data entry and other clerical tasks. We are so grateful that she chooses to share her skills with us, and we always look forward to seeing her.

Thank you, Sandy, for generously giving your time throughout the year. We appreciate you!



Helping Harvest

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HelpingHarvest.org

About Our Organization . . .

Helping Harvest established in 1983, collects, purchases, stores, and distributes over eight million pounds of food annually to the more than 320 programs which feed the hungry in Berks & Schuylkill counties.

