IMPACT REPORT
RESPONDING TO COVID-19

COVID-19 ruptures the Rhode Island economy

In mid-March, the Rhode Island economy began to shut down due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Within weeks of the start of the crisis, thousands of Rhode Islanders filed for unemployment, causing one of the highest spikes in the country. As of the writing of this report, the state’s unemployment rate was at 16.3%, up from 3.4% in February, before the pandemic.

THE RESULT: Need for food assistance soars

From March through May, the Food Bank increased food distribution by 42 percent to pantries and meal programs that make up its statewide network of member agencies. This effort included the distribution of 260,000 pre-packaged meals from FEMA ensuring that food reached vulnerable low-income seniors and families who could not safely access grocery stores or food pantries.

Prior to COVID-19 the Food Bank’s member agency network was providing food to about 53,000 people on average per month. By the end of April, we were serving an estimated 67,000 individuals through our member agencies and emergency sites. That number represents nearly as many people as we were helping at the height of the recession.

“Income is hard right now. I lost my job because of COVID-19. I feel safe here because everyone wears masks and stays six feet apart. The food is all good. It’s all healthy food, which is good for my family.”

Maria Elena, receiving food assistance at the Community Action Partnership of Providence (CAPP).
Without school meals, child hunger increases

When COVID-19 closed schools, 52,000 Rhode Island children stopped receiving free or reduced-price school lunch. A national survey conducted by the Brookings Institution in April found that **40 percent of households with children under age 12 could not afford adequate food.**

In three months, March, April and May, the **Food Bank distributed 16,300 Meals4Kids boxes**, each containing a week’s worth of kid-friendly breakfasts, lunches and snacks.

School districts in Rhode Island offered “grab and go” meals for pick-up by parents. In addition, the federal program, Pandemic-EBT, gave parents of students who receive free or reduced-price lunch $5.70 for each day that schools were closed.

Keeping everyone safe from COVID-19

When the pandemic began, the Food Bank cancelled all volunteers and sent many staff to work from home. The remaining staff worked overtime to sort food, pack boxes, pick orders, and make deliveries to our agencies. Saturday shifts were added to keep up with the huge increase in the need for food.

The Food Bank and agencies also instituted other safety measures to keep staff, volunteers and guests safe:

- Food pantries pre-pack food for distribution in boxes or bags. Previous best practice was to allow guests to “shop” and choose what they need.
- Many agencies started drive-through pantries to maintain social distance.
- Meal programs and soup kitchens now only provide to-go meals.
- Many agencies set up home delivery for high-risk seniors.