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Second Harvest Heartland Doubles SNAP Outreach Capacity During COVID-19 Pandemic

SNAP outreach team adapts to meet growing need for food assistance as SNAP referrals double

BROOKLYN PARK, Minn. (April 27, 2020) — Second Harvest Heartland’s [SNAP outreach team](#) is working harder than ever to ensure newly eligible Minnesotans successfully enroll in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, so they can access the food and nutrition needed to weather the COVID-19 pandemic. March was the single largest month for referral and application volume ever for Second Harvest Heartland’s SNAP outreach program. The team is processing double its average caseload to keep up with the high volume of new SNAP referrals.

“Although our primary role as a food bank is sourcing and delivering food to our food shelf and meal program partners, the reality is that Minnesota’s emergency food system is not robust enough to keep our neighbors fed, especially during this challenging time,” said Allison O’Toole, CEO of Second Harvest Heartland. “Our SNAP outreach team is working harder than ever to ensure every Minnesotan who needs food assistance — many of whom have never had to navigate this system before — gets it.”

Before the COVID-19 crisis began, one in 11 Minnesotans and one in eight Minnesota children experienced food insecurity. Now, with one in five Minnesotans facing unemployment and dramatically reduced incomes, the number of Minnesotans experiencing hunger has exponentially increased. SNAP referrals doubled from this same time last year, with outreach specialists receiving more than 1,000 requests for help and assisting nearly 600 Minnesotans in filling out and submitting applications. Of the meals generated through Second Harvest Heartland’s SNAP outreach, 68% were for children. This need is not only concentrated in metro-area counties; Anoka, Sherburne and Blue Earth counties saw the greatest percentage increase in applications over March 2019. April has also shown higher than usual SNAP outreach numbers, with a 96% increase in SNAP referrals and a 138% increase in submitted applications compared to April 2019.

To help meet the demand, Second Harvest Heartland has pulled in employees from other departments to assist with screening, and this week the SNAP team begins training a new intern cohort to help process calls. Additionally, Second Harvest Heartland continues to make progress on a project to leverage digital referrals to be more efficient and effective in how SNAP outreach is conducted during this public health crisis.

Further complicating efforts to keep hunger at bay is the fact that federal cuts to SNAP were well underway before this crisis began. “While these administrative changes are temporarily on hold, the last thing we need during this public health and economic crisis is a cut to food assistance,” said O’Toole.

We know that for every meal provided by our state’s network of food banks, food shelves, and meal programs, SNAP provides nine.

“The health benefits of food assistance participation have long been recognized,” said Theresa McCormick, Second Harvest Heartland Director of Programs. “Investing in a program that supports the health and well-being of those in need is more important now than ever.”

Second Harvest Heartland is also in close communication with the Department of Human Services to ensure Minnesota is taking full advantage of all available opportunities to expand access to SNAP and reduce the administrative burden on enrollees and staff. Many states across the country have paved the way for Minnesota

by addressing the administrative and data barriers that can delay the approval and implementation of these waivers.

Anyone who is or knows a Minnesotan struggling to afford food is encouraged to contact the Second Harvest Heartland SNAP outreach team by calling 651-209-7963 or visiting 2harvest.org/SNAP.

About Second Harvest Heartland

Second Harvest Heartland is one of the nation's largest, most efficient and most innovative hunger relief organizations. Second Harvest Heartland provides an average of 75 percent of all food distributed by its food shelf partners, and in 2019, provided more than 97 million meals to nearly 1,000 food shelves, pantries and other partner programs serving 59 counties in Minnesota and western Wisconsin. Second Harvest Heartland leads through innovation, finding efficient, effective solutions to connect the full resources of our community with our hungry neighbors. For more information, visit 2harvest.org or call 651.484.5117.

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