

FOOD ASSISTANCE

‘Every action has an impact’

Weld Food Bank, District 6 food pantries awarded grant funding, but more help is needed



Students from Frontier Academy pack food while inside the Weld County Food Bank on Friday in Greeley. PHOTOS BY JIM RYDBOM — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Volunteers load food into cars during a snow storm at the Weld County Food Bank on Friday in Greeley.

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The Weld Food Bank communications manager feels like a broken record each year when he shares the need for food assistance has never been this high before.

This happened again after the food bank experienced its busiest month to date in October, according to Weston Edmunds, the communications manager for the nonprofit.

As the need grows, assistance programs from food banks to pantries need funding to meet the rising demand.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Weld Food Bank has reached new peaks in clientele every year, according to CEO Bob O'Connor. As

grocery prices remain high in the wake of inflation, more people seek out long-term help to put food on the table.

In Weld County, 88,000 residents will find themselves without enough food to eat at some point this year.

On average, 1,300 people a day lean on the food bank's Emergency Food Program, which Edmunds considers to be "the measuring stick for hunger in Weld County." This time last year, the program averaged 975 people a day.

The Emergency Food Program surpassed 10,000 households for the first time in October — making it the bank's busiest month ever, right before what's usually the busiest season for the food bank as staff and volunteers begin collecting turkeys and other food donations for Thanksgiving and Christmas time.

Colorado's Community Food Grants program has granted more than \$2 million to 88 emergency food assistance providers in the state for the 2024-25 year, according to a Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger news release. More than \$1 million will go to the five Feeding Colorado food banks, which includes the Weld Food Bank, and their hunger-relief partners across the state. Another \$1 million will go toward 83 food pantries, including the pantries inside the schools in Greeley-Evans District 6.

House Bill 2024-1407, the Community Food Assistance Provider Grant Program, will allocate \$3 million in funding for food assistance over the next five years. The Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger administers the grant program, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Human Services, to help children and families get nutritious food in their communities when they need it the most.

The Weld Food Bank gauges the community's food needs based on the Emergency Food Program because families can access food assistance at the bank in Greeley between 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. Other programs have limited clientele and schedules, such as the Backpack Program, which provides food to children at risk of going hungry over the weekend without school meals.

Stephanie Gausch, the food bank's chief development officer, said the nonprofit has been "aggressively pursuing additional funding" to meet another rise in food insecurity among county residents.

"We're serving twice as many people through this program, but we're not able to double our fundraising," she said about the Emergency Food Program. "We're looking at ways to stretch our dollar further, to make it last longer."

As the need rises, the bank must bring in more volunteers, food donations and funding.

Just in time for the holiday season rush, the Weld Food Bank received a \$152,000 grant from the Community Food Grants program, specifically to purchase local agricultural products. The food bank experiences difficulties accessing nutritious, local products due to higher costs. Grant funding helps feed people and support agriculture in the seventh-largest agriculture county in the nation, according to Edmunds.

O'Connor called this grant a "win-win" for clients who get healthy produce, dairy and meat and for local farmers who get business, some of which have supported the Weld Food Bank for more than 30 years.

“Everybody’s struggling, including our donors,” O’Connor said. “So this really does make a difference.”

The Weld Food Bank handed out 15.6 million pounds of food last year, 9.5 million pounds of which were fresh produce, meat and dairy, Edmunds reported.

In addition to bringing healthy, locally-sourced food to community members through the food bank, the grant program also awarded the Success Foundation, which serves District 6, and Ann K. Heiman Elementary School in District 6, for their individual efforts to feed hungry kids in the Greeley and Evans communities

School food pantries go beyond feeding students

In Weld County, 1 in 3 children struggle with hunger and food insecurity. School lunches are often the only meal of the day for such students.

The Success Foundation received \$5,000 to support stocking the 34 pantries, which are located in every school in District 6, with locally-sourced food as well as culturally relevant food to all student populations, according to Julie Hill, the foundation’s executive director.

A partnership between District 6 nutrition services and the Success Foundation formed to ensure every school had a food pantry, which was finalized this school year. Now, the agency’s efforts have shifted to sustaining these pantries that have become a necessity for students and their families.

The Success Foundation’s initial student achievement focuses were on bringing devices and digital content into the classroom, Hill said.

However, through the partnership with nutrition services, they quickly realized child nutrition ties directly to student achievement.

Hill believes the first step of providing children with a quality education experience starts with making sure students are fed. Hunger contributes to behavioral problems, health issues, social setbacks and low academic achievements.

“Students can’t learn if they’re hungry,” Hill said. “That’s a real reality for many of our children and families with over 70% of students qualifying for free or reduced price meals. There is a great need in our district.”

Food pantries expand nutritious food offerings past one free school meal, going as far as offering snacks throughout the school day to meals to take-home to their families.

Ann K. Heiman Elementary School in Evans has had a food pantry up and running before the district-wide push to get one into every school.

The Heiman Huskies’ food pantry, known as the Husky Hub, formed when Stefanie Mora, a counselor, and another staff member wanted to improve community connection and help meet family needs, which include food, toiletries and clothing.

Families in the Evans community who require food assistance either have to go across town to the food bank or wait for a mobile food pantry to come to them. The two employees thought a food pantry at their children’s school would be more accessible, especially to those who live in the Hill N’ Park neighborhood, an unincorporated area that experiences food insecurity and lacks a nearby grocery store.

Last school year, Heiman received a \$5,000 grant for the pantry's food costs from the state's Community Food Grants program. Due to the funding's impact, Mora and her teammate applied again, receiving another \$5,000 for the 2024-25 school year.

Before the grant funding, staff members would have to find a balance between asking for community donations during food drives to finding ways to continue the efforts themselves. A current system in place, in addition to state funds, includes a "Snack Shop," stocked by Mora and her husband who teaches at Heiman. Teachers and staff members can purchase snacks from the shop during the school week to create revenue that 100% supports buying food and supplies for the pantry.

"We don't want to lean so heavily on our community, because that's who we're trying to support," Mora said. "It feels difficult to ask a family to give what they have when really they need it from us."

Donations from the community usually come in the form of canned food, Mora added, making it harder to provide full meals to families. With last year's grant money, staff who help run the pantry purchased fresh proteins, like ground beef, pork and chorizo, through the Evans-based meat processor Innovative Foods.

"Those are things that our community culturally uses in a lot of their meals," Mora said. "That's a really important part of the grant ... have it be locally sourced products as much as possible, but then also culturally relevant to the community that you serve."

Excess funds went to purchasing fresh produce, like onions, potatoes and carrots, to give to families with the highest need at the end of the school year so they had extra products in their kitchen at the start of summer.

The grant also helped make the school's food assistance approaches even more attainable through the inception of a Mobile Food Pantry, available two days a week after school. Parents can just walk up and grab what they need.

Since Heiman obtained the grant in September 2023, the food pantry has served about 647 people, Mora reported.

“Because we are fully stocked pretty much all the time, our students and their families always have a place to go,” Mora said. “I feel like we've experienced a lot less food insecurity and a lot more knowing that they aren't by themselves.”

Heiman staff plan to gain more community input on what families need. With the second year of support from the state, she feels excited to continue to grow the pantry efforts.

A recent food drive helped the Success Foundation collect more than 800 pounds of food and almost \$1,000 to support food pantries, according to Hill. This grant, however, will allow for more locally-sourced purchases to distribute through food pantries and pilot obtaining diverse offerings for all the cultures that make up District 6.

“We're trying to connect with families through offering security,” Mora said. “We want them to know that there's always a place. There's no judgment, it's just love and support”

Heightened holiday season needs

November and December become the most active times of year at the Weld Food Bank because weather changes lead to surges in utility bills and the holidays bring in additional expenses for families.

“We all understand that the holiday season is a time for families to get together and spend time together,” Gausch said. “So much of that ritual and that experience is based around a meal. We just feel like it’s a really important part that we can play during the holiday season to make sure no matter what else is going on in those families lives ... that they still have that traditional meal to be able to enjoy together as a family.”

The food bank often sources out for additional funding to help fill the deficit during the holidays, but most of the support comes from community members and agency partners, Gausch said.

In the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, the Weld Food Bank collects turkeys and the fixings to deliver a basic holiday meal to families in need. As of Friday morning, the food bank has collected just 11 turkeys out of their goal to reach 6,000. In 2023, they received about 5,500 turkeys.

The food bank works with agency partners — churches, community pantries and soup kitchens — to reach the 4,000 square miles of service area. This partnership allows food assistance to be intentional about how those meals go out, helping the bank gather food and families with the utmost needs in every corner of the county.

“They know their clientele. They know their community better than us,” O’Conner said. “So they tell us what they need, and we go and get it.”

Whether someone can give just one can of food or an entire shopping cart, every donation makes a difference for local families.

Community members can donate turkeys by going to the Weld Food Bank, 1108 8th St., in Greeley during business hours or waiting for

the annual food drive efforts at grocery stores on Saturday, Nov. 23. Those looking to give back during the holidays can spot the Weld Food Bank in front of almost every retail grocery partner in the county — King Soopers, Safeway and Walmart — from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

To view the full list of locations, go to bit.ly/3YEVR8a.

“It’s making it convenient for the community to help us, because we understand it’s a busy time of year,” Edmunds said. “If folks can’t make a special trip, we try to catch them on that big shopping day.”

Financial donations can also make an impact this holiday season.

“Even a \$100 can turn into 300 meals,” Edmunds said.

Gausch estimated the food bank needs to raise a minimum of \$1.5 million to get through the holidays. Thankfully, donations can be doubled during this time through various matching opportunities.

The week of Thanksgiving gives donors the opportunity to double their financial contribution because companies can match the donation up to \$50,000. The Weld Food Bank also participates in Colorado Gives Day, which runs between Nov. 1 to Dec. 10.

To donate through Colorado Gives Day, go to coloradogives.org/organization/Weldfoodbank.

“If people have been thinking, ‘I want to start helping my community and jumping on board,’ this is the perfect time to do it,” Edmunds said.

Post-holiday volunteer needs

The Weld Food Bank relies on 100-150 volunteers each day to keep up with the need from helpers in the warehouse to those making

deliveries. Every role, big or small, helps feed a neighbor.

“I want you to think of every scoop of pinto beans to not just be a scoop of beans into a bag, but that that is a family you’re feeding,” Edmunds said. “You may not get to look them in the eyes and for them to say, ‘Thank you,’ but every action has an impact. When your action is helping the food bank, you’re ultimately helping your neighbor.”

This time of year sees an increased desire to help volunteer. The food bank wants to remind people the food bank needs volunteers past the giving season, into January and the months that follow.

To give funds, food or time, go to weldfoodbank.org/i-want-to-help.

“We love to show the impact,” Edmunds said. “Whether it’s \$1, \$100, \$1,000, a turkey, time out in the warehouse ... every little piece falls into place to make sure that our community is fed, not only during the holidays, but all year round.”