

FEATURED

Feeding Avery Families' year in review

By Luke Barber luke.barber@averyjournal.com

Feb 17, 2021



Volunteers buzz around Feeding Avery Families' headquarters in Newland preparing for a weekly food distribution in January.

Photo submitted

NEWLAND — 2020 was a tumultuous year for many, but fortunately community organizations like Feeding Avery Families were hard at work making sure that healthy and nutritious food is in the refrigerators and pantries of families across Avery County.

“The first couple of months of 2020 were ‘business as usual’ as (we) worked on several new initiatives. Then COVID-19 hit in March. (We) immediately pivoted (our) distribution on Fridays from client-choice shopping inside to drive-through pickup outside. The hard-working volunteers didn’t blink as they adjusted routines and came up with many ‘out of the box’ ideas to get food to a growing number of hungry families,” FAF volunteer Mark File said.

File compiled a list of the top highlights of community activity that the nonprofit undertook over the course of the past year. During this time period, FAF received and distributed 746,000 pounds of food, about 50 percent more than the previous year. File said that it was enough food to provide approximately 622,000 individual meals, and 86 percent of the food was provided at no cost from organizations like MANNA FoodBank, as well as through government programs and business donations.

While some volunteers had to take a step back, more than 350 volunteers kept the wheels of the operation turning. Every Thursday, FAF received deliveries of up to 30,000 pounds of food, which included canned and boxed groceries, fresh produce and frozen meats. The multitude of volunteers sorted items, unpacked pallets and stocked shelves to aid the distribution effort.

On distribution Fridays, FAF served an average of 546 families, or more than 1,348 individuals, per month. Each family received more than 60 pounds of food, including boxes of groceries, frozen meats, produce, bread, juices and milk.

In January 2020, FAF dedicated five community pantries that are open 24/7 and distributed about 5,000 pounds of food each month. The pantries are located at Avery County High, Newland Elementary, Riverside Elementary, Banner Elk Elementary, and Cranberry Middle/Freedom Trail Elementary. One additional pantry opened in Crossnore behind Fellowship Presbyterian Church in June.

While school was in session, FAF provided 125 children with two backpacks each week to provide enough food for 12 meals. Meanwhile, as school was out of session FAF partnered with First Things Foundation and Avery County Schools to deliver food directly to the homes of school children by following bus routes to deliver food to 77 families each week.

FAF's new nutrition center and annex opened as well. However, the pandemic put FAF's new Community Health Education Initiative on hold. Nevertheless, the extra space provided enough room to house the extra food the nonprofit had received. Additionally, inside each of the nine Avery County Schools volunteers stocked a pantry to provide snacks for teachers to give to hungry students during the school day.

During the summer, FAF partnered with a local farm to distribute fresh farm produce to homes of schoolchildren

and gave away more than 80 tons of fresh produce during the year. Through the partnership with MANNA FoodBank and Avery County Schools, volunteers served up to 250 families each month and distributed nearly 13,000 pounds of food at each event. FAF also gave out free pet food on most distribution Fridays thanks to a generous donor.

High Country Charitable Foundation, along with AMY Wellness Foundation, awarded a \$50,000 grant to FAF to purchase a van for mobile services programs, including the pantries and school backpacks. The van is expected arrive in this spring. For Thanksgiving, the HCCF funded the purchase of 600 Thanksgiving turkeys to give away during November distribution days.

Local grocery chains also chipped in to help. Food Lion in Banner Elk donated more than 3,000 pounds of food each month, and Lowes Foods in Banner Elk donated food items via the checkout lines through the Friends Feeding Friends program, which included about 7,000 pounds of food each month.

Churches, businesses, civic groups, colleges and many other generous organizations held community food drives for FAF. Amazon shoppers were even able to donate as well. Through AmazonSmile donations, FAF has received \$1,000 to date. When an Amazon shopper designates Feeding Avery Families as the recipient, Amazon donates a percentage of each purchase. Shoppers simply have to select FAF as the recipient at no cost to the customer.

Lastly, as FAF programs expanded last year, JoAnn McMurray was promoted as co-director to share leadership with Dick Larson. Due to FAF's ability to secure top-quality food at very low costs, and by using hundreds of volunteers to keep administrative costs minimal, the organization's total cost per meal was just 30 cents. File says that Feeding Avery Families is looking forward to a successful year ahead as the organization continues to serve the community.

