

FEATURE

THE SILENT FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER IN THE LBIR REGION

THE HUNGER FOUNDATION OF SOUTHERN OCEAN COUNTY 501(C)(3)
CELEBRATES 25 YEARS AS IT BRACES FOR THE DAYS AHEAD

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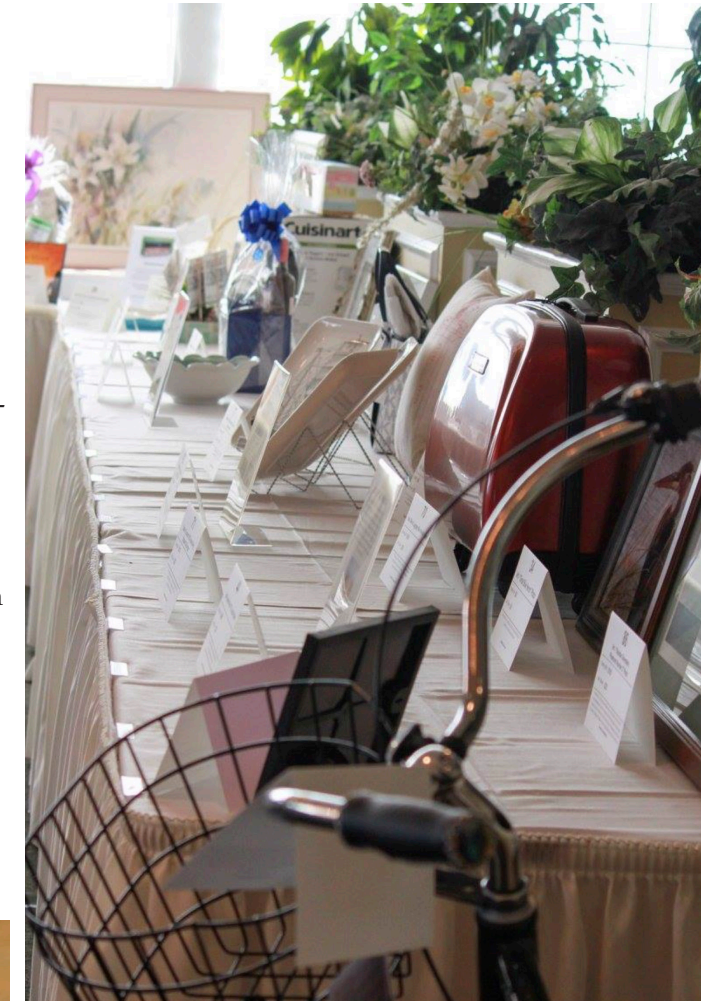
In New Jersey, long lines at food pantries are becoming an all too familiar sight during these unprecedented times. As inconceivable as it may seem in America's second wealthiest state, even before COVID-19 hit, nearly 14% of New Jersey households—that's 1 in every 8 people and 1 in every 5 children—were already classified as food insecure. Food insecurity is when you are unable to provide enough food for every person in your household to live an active, healthy life. Within the LBI region in particular, where local pantries serve approximately 136,000 of our neighbors, almost half of those seeking meals from food pantries are actually children. In a more recent Hamilton Project/Future of the Middle Class Initiative Survey of Mothers with Young Children, researchers found that as of April, 40.9% of mothers with children ages 12 and under reported household food insecurity since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Ian W. Smith, the executive chef and chief instructor at the Ocean County Vo-Tech Culinary Arts program, a moment that shattered all stereotypical food insecurity assumptions that was burned into his brain 25 years ago. He was leaving from a long day's work as then-chef at Bally's Atlantic City. He watched brokenheartedly from across the street as a mother pushed her child in a stroller past a dumpster that collected leftover food waste which was intended to be carted over to pig farms and used as feed. As automobiles whizzed by, he watched her movements in flash photography frames through the breaks in traffic, when he would catch a clear glimpse of her after one bumper ended before the next vehicle drove by. She discreetly walked up to the dumpster, lifted the lid, and began scouring the large trash container for food. As soon as she gathered enough to put dinner on the table that evening, she vanished. She did not "look" poor, as later he would do his best to convey to the community. The gut-wrenching incidence had a significant impact on Smith, and he vowed, as a chef, to make it his mission to not only feed those who were hungry, but to help the impoverished families of our area who did not have access to their next meal, obtain food security in a safe and shameless way.

Chef Ian learned that Southern Ocean County's handful of food pantries (which is where families go to obtain food) were all a part of

the same supply channel from a regional food bank (the storage facility that purchases and distributes food and resources to the local pantries). This food bank, itself overwhelmed, distributed food and resources to more than 300 food pantries and soup kitchens within Monmouth and Ocean Counties—including 8 in the LBI region. And in the early 1990s, food banks rarely distributed to pantries more than once or twice a month.

Since local pantries do not have the means to organize proper fundraising, Smith brought together fellow members of the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce and local neighbors to come together and created the concept of the Southern Ocean County Hunger Foundation, which is celebrating its 25-year anniversary this year. The mission of this entirely volunteer-run, grassroots 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization would be to generate capital and create the wherewithal for ongoing donations to each of the 8 local pantries of the LBI region that needed help keeping their shelves stocked. They planned a fundraising dinner in order to help fund the regional pantries. *It takes food to raise money for hunger*, they realized. The Chamber team entitled their event the Taste Dinner, and their vision was to donate 100% of the proceeds and distribute them evenly among the 8 pantries in Southern Ocean County who were in desperate need of more resources and funding in order to service the families walking through their doors.



The concept was simple: bring community members together for an opportunity to taste exquisite dishes (10 courses, to be exact) prepared by a collective of the region's top chefs—putting competition aside as they harmoniously plated meals from a shared kitchen for one night only—volunteering their talents and donating the food. Pooling each chamber member's individual talents, the group intended to raise money through ticket sales, raffles, auctions and donations, and be able to help fund local food pantries while gathering the community together for a fun night out. While that first year, the *Taste Dinner* earned a meager \$3,500, by the time its 25th Anniversary rolled around, with the unwavering support of local restaurant establishments and the generosity of the community members, the foundation has been able to raise upwards of \$120,000 for the pantries with its headlining event. Since its inception, the foundation has further added Bourbon tasting events, Holiday Dinners, Painting Parties and even a 5k run/walk event on Long Beach Island to their annual fundraising repertoire. To date, it has donated well over 1.5 million dollars directly to our local pantries in order to support hunger relief in Southern Ocean County.



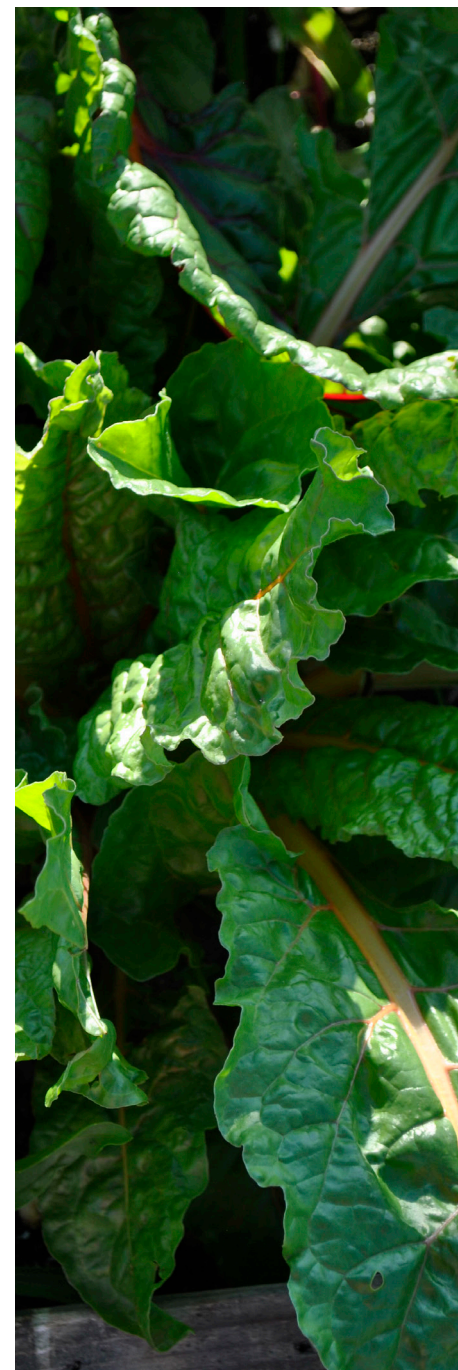
ALL OF THE MONEY RAISED THROUGH THE HUNGER FOUNDATION'S FUNDRAISING EFFORTS ARE DISTRIBUTED EQUALLY TO THE FOLLOWING LOCAL FOOD PANTRIES IN SOUTHERN OCEAN COUNTY:

St. Francis Center Food Pantry (Long Beach Township)
Ocean Community Church Food Ministry (Manahawkin)
Barnegat Food Pantry and Ken's Kitchen at St. Mary's Parish
(both in Barnegat)
St. Theresa's Church (Little Egg Harbor)
Greater Tuckerton Food Pantry (Tuckerton)
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church Food Pantry (Waretown)
Lacey Food Bank Program (Forked River)

It is important to note that even before COVID-19, statistics in Monmouth and Ocean Counties showed that 27% of all households have an income less than \$30,000 annually. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Federal Poverty Guidelines used to determine financial eligibility for certain federal programs such as SNAP, WIC and the National School Lunch Program only considers a family of 4 at the eligible poverty level if the household earns less than \$26,200 a year. Our shore community has a relatively high cost of living—with the average rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in Manahawkin being \$1,600 a month (which means that one-quarter of the households in our area, pay more than half of their income just to put a roof over their family's heads)—even families earning twice the federal poverty level are still stricken with food insecurity. (This statistic coincided with an unemployment rate of 3.5% dated February 2020, according to the United States Department of Labor. In April 2020, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, the unemployment rate rose to 14.7% (a 123.077% increase), and although there was no updated statistic regarding the number of food insecure people in the LBI region at the time this article was written, we have every reason to believe that over the past few months, the number of Southern Ocean County residents requiring assistance to provide food for their families has dramatically increased.)*



Although there may not be enough direct access to fresh food in a state poignantly known for its gardens, the family of The Hunger Foundation of Southern Ocean County's president, Peg Reynolds, has contributed to fighting hunger in the best way they know how—gardening. At the Stafford Community Garden at Lake Manahawkin, The Hunger Foundation's Community Garden (sponsored in part by Reynolds Garden Shop, but operated entirely by volunteers), neighbors take turns donating their time to cultivate, seed, plant, water, prune, weed and harvest fruits and veggies from a garden that any disadvantaged member of the community can access at any time if they need some fruits or veggies. There is no gate, as the garden is open 24/7 and is accessible to anyone who is in need of fresh produce, day or night. In addition to the pantries and soup kitchens that The Hunger Foundation supports, the intent behind starting a Community Garden was to supplement all of the nonperishable boxed and canned items with fresh food that may not be stable for pantries to supply, but is equally as important in providing families with access to nutritious and delicious, seasonal produce.





The Hunger Foundation of Southern Ocean County is in need of, now, more than ever, support and volunteers to help them continue to carry out their mission. The most cost-effective way to help is through a monetary donation, as it allows food banks and pantries to purchase from suppliers and farms at reduced costs, it lends flexibility, and it reduces waste. You can visit hfoso.org/donate to make a donation. You can also check the events tab on The Hunger Foundation's website, hfoso.org/events, and attend any of their upcoming fundraising events. (If social distancing continues to disallow public events, the website will be updated with GoFundMe information.) Together with the Stafford Library, the Hunger Foundation also puts on events at the Community Garden for both children and adults such as a "Read and Weed" series on Tuesdays at 10am in the summer to encourage participation and volunteering to do garden chores, as well as Weekly Volunteer Hours for hands-on learning about composting, rain barrel water conservation, etc. on Wednesdays at 3pm. Educational opportunities are also available for scouts and other community organizations.

Every \$1 you donate can provide 3 meals to our neighbors. Food insecurity is an issue for children as much as it is for the elderly, and everyone in between. With Feeding America, the nation's largest group of foodbanks, seeing a staggering 100% increase in demand at distribution centers, one cannot assume who is in need and who is not, especially now. There is still a stigma to needing assistance and in this time of crisis, our community is urged to show compassion for its members. Please help the Hunger Foundation of Southern Ocean County feed a neighbor, today. Visit www.hfoso.org for more information.

CHILDREN SHOULD BE HAPPY... NOT HUNGRY

*** 19.3% OF
OCEAN COUNTY'S CHILDREN
ARE FOOD INSECURE**

*According to the latest numbers available from Feeding America



**Please help us with our vision
"A COMMUNITY WHERE ALL
OF OUR NEIGHBORS ARE
FREE FROM HUNGER"**

The Hunger Foundation has hosted Fundraising Events and received Donations to provide much needed financial support to our local community food banks.

We Proudly Support
Barnegat Food Pantry, Fr. Ken's Kitchen at St. Mary's Parish,
Greater Tuckerton Food Pantry,
Lacey Food Bank Program, Ocean Community Church,
St. Francis Community Center, St. Episcopal Church

To Support our efforts, and learn more about our activities.
Your donations and participation are greatly appreciated!

Please visit our website - www.HFOSO.org