

Every month for more than 14 years, Clifton Park Baptist Church (CPBC) has served our community with groceries to over 200 households. Each month, our community counted on us to open the doors of the church and invite them in for some hot chocolate in the winter, water in the summer, and a snack as they registered to pick up groceries for the month. Folks had the opportunity to pick out clothing from our Clothing Closet, and speak to other local community organizations who would set up tables in hopes of offering their services and resources to those in need. Over the years, our congregation and community partners have given out backpacks filled with school supplies, provided flu shots, performed blood pressure checks, assisted with voter registration, assisted in finding more food opportunities, and more. Our goal has been to make sure the community has the basic necessities of food, and to help in connecting the dots to other needs that may exist.

Due to the current pandemic, a lot has changed. The first month of the shutdown, we lost our food donations at the same time countless people had lost their jobs. We were once a place that could be counted on, and we had to close our doors. This is unacceptable. We quickly searched around for help so that we could get back up and running and serve the people who may be struggling even more than before. This led us into a relationship with Montgomery County's Department of Health and Human Services. We became one of eight Service Consolidation Hubs within the county. The county connected us with 500 boxes of food every two weeks, then every week. As the need grew, the hub grew. And as time went on, the produce and nonperishables that were delivered each week, were threatened to end. Fall of 2020, just as we were getting started as a hub, we were told produce donations were going to stop, but they went another month. A month later we were told they were going to stop again and the nonperishable donations would end at the end of the year. Everyone feared the money would run out and we are aware that at some point it will. Each month we would fear that this was the final month, even when our household numbers grew each week. It was a rollercoaster ride.

Currently, CPBC receives food from the local food bank once again, and the county. The county felt confident that we will receive produce and nonperishables through December 2021, and now through June 2022 and is pushing to have the same level of funding available for the beginning of the year without knowledge of what FY23 looks like. As this amount of funding is a huge blessing for our community, it's currently still not enough. Our partners are expanding, the word is getting out. It's putting the hub into a space where we need to secure ways to always keep up with the food demands and find some sustainability and resiliency.

The pandemic has shown us a few things such as how fragile our systems are, what the needs and gaps are, and who wants to take a stand in making a difference for those in need. One way we are taking a stand is by using aeroponics to grow our own food. Aeroponics allows for vertical growing which maximizes our urban space, the ability to grow indoors, all year round, use 90% less water than traditional farming, using little to no pesticides, all to become a sustainable source for those who are experiencing food insecurities. With this technology, CPBC has begun an aeroponic garden, currently with 24 aeroponic towers growing a variety of produce which is harvested weekly and distributed at CPBC's food distributions.

We are a church that is passionate and focused on a mission to feed the people who are experiencing food insecurities in our community. Not only are we growing food for the community (also building a greenhouse to expand our growing which will house another 24 aeroponic towers) but we want individual households to have some sort of resiliency in their own homes by helping them grow their own food providing aeroponic towers. Being able to grow their own food gives some resiliency, empowerment, and security during these hard times along with the mental health benefits that come along with gardening.

Fresh nutrient dense food is a huge need in our area. There are grocery stores in walking distance though the produce is typically not organic, has sat on trucks for hundreds and thousands of miles before it reached the store shelves which means it's covered in chemicals that help its life be prolonged all the while it loses its nutrients. Helping people grow at home will help their health which impacts so many aspects of our livelihood. There are far more cheap fast food restaurant options than economically healthy ones.

Growing food in homes can benefit the whole family, especially our next generations. Too many of our youth arrive at school hungry each morning. Our community has children who only eat during school days and are starving during the weekends. We have local nonprofits organizations who help to provide weekend groceries for families like this to help in those gap times. We want to be a part of helping some of the youth in our community have more healthy food access, to be engaged in growing food, seeing where food comes from, and enjoying the fruits of their growing labor. In one case, there was a teacher who asked her second grade students where their food comes from. Among the answers were 'the mall' and 'the refrigerator.' We truly want to be a part of helping these young children learn about healthy foods. Another quick example, my personal story, my young children do not always want to eat the vegetables on their plate, but love walking up to our aeroponic tower and eating the food straight off the machine. That is the type of interaction and healthy food promotion is what we want to create.

When the community is requesting more produce, especially those with the all too common health issues of diabetes and high blood pressure, greens are top on the list for any specific requests. When ordering produce through our food distributors, greens are not usually on the list and the rare times when we do receive them, most times the greens are in the 'wilting' stage. Using our garden, we want to improve the health of our community while addressing food insecurity and community produce preferences, even on a small scale though the demand and need is high. Our community has been hit hard during the pandemic but was struggling before. Today people are deciding to buy groceries or pay their rent. Our hope is for a food system that values each and every person, provides clean fresh nutrient dense foods that are not the leftovers that the community in need are tired of, and a system that gives dignity, inclusion, and access.

From losing the donations from the local food bank, the uncertainty of funding through the county, and the pressure of now serving about 1,400-1,700 households each week, we need to take some of the risk out of the situation and become sustainable for those who count on us. The fact is that Clifton Park Baptist Church is the Silver Spring Hub and our numbers are rising. Because we are now on the map, not only do we have community members who find us

because they are in need, but we have community partners who have lost their food donations and reach out to us for help as we are the local food hub. Without ways to sustain ourselves, without ways to come up with more food, we are unable to help. Whether people receive the food from the garden or they grow their own food, we want to provide more access to healthier foods while sustaining our food distribution program and creating sustainability within homes. It's been said, we can either buy produce for the next five years, or create the infrastructure to grow produce for years to come. Food systems matter.