



Recipe for Hope

A CAMPAIGN FOR
THE RIVER FOOD PANTRY

Food is the Foundation

Every day in Madison—in one of our state’s richest counties, in the world’s most prosperous nation—thousands of our neighbors lack the resources to meet their families’ basic needs.

These neighbors are low-income families with children, seniors scraping by on a fixed income, and veterans who have served their country. They include people experiencing homelessness, joblessness, underemployment, and challenges to their physical or mental health. They are people you know, even if food insecurity isn’t obvious.

Many people face circumstances that stretch household budgets and force them to choose what to do without. Will they forego car repairs? A payment toward a medical bill? New shoes for a growing child?

Thanks to The River Food Pantry, there’s one hard decision these families won’t have to make: whether they can afford to put a healthy meal on their table.

For nearly 20 years, our neighbors in need have been able to count on us for reliable access to free, healthy food. In 2023 alone, our fellow Wisconsinites used The River’s services more than 276,000 times. We have nourished communities throughout Dane County, improving people’s lives.

Over the years we’ve gotten to know our neighbors. We’ve watched as social and economic challenges create trial after trial, and done our best to offer a helping hand as people work to get back on their feet. Through our daily interactions, we’ve seen firsthand how access to healthy food impacts people’s lives—but also recognize how much is yet to be done.



An Award-Winning Organization

The River Food Pantry has long been recognized for its efforts aiding the community. In 2023, The River received several honors including being voted **Best Charitable Organization** (from among 3,000 area nonprofits) and **Best Chef** through the Madison.com 2023 People’s Choice Awards. The River also received the **High Impact Award** during the 2022 North Star Awards for its enduring support of Madison’s Northside community.





A Recipe in the Making

Almost two decades ago, a group of concerned Madison residents saw too many hungry people in our community and decided to do something about it.

In the beginning, that “something” was a monthly community dinner on Madison’s Northside. While a reliable meal and a chance to connect were a great start, the founders quickly realized that their neighbors had greater nutritional needs. Thus, a small emergency food pantry was created.

As a growing number of neighbors came for a meal or relied on the pantry to help cover that week’s food bill, it soon became apparent that it was time to think bigger. A warehouse was rented near the areas of greatest need, volunteers gave more than 3,500 hours of their time to craft a space, and in 2006 The River Food Pantry was born.

Since then, The River has become South Central Wisconsin’s busiest food pantry, serving more than 2,500 people each week. Thanks to our dedicated team, partner organizations, and generous donors who steadfastly support our work, we are able to provide free, reliable access to healthy food and essential household supplies.



“Thanks to The River, I was able to bridge food gaps while paying for necessities such as rent, childcare, and utilities—all of which are prerequisites for economic advancement. The pantry was a vital resource. My family and I were able to bridge many basic needs because The River made support accessible. The River truly meets people where they are and enables families to break generational cycles of poverty.”

—Georgia A., Volunteer and Former Client



The River's mission then and now:

To provide the food, resources, and faith needed to achieve our vision of a stronger, fully nourished community. We achieve this by operating a network of mutually supportive programs that reduce waste and increase access. We meet our neighbors where they are—in the ways, times, and spaces that they need.

What is The River's recipe? First, abundant portions of respect, compassion, community, generosity, and caring are prepared by dedicated community members and staff. Then we pair this entree with a welcoming, equitable environment that upholds clients' dignity through food choice, and garnish with an aspiration to deliver services as sustainably as possible.

A Full Menu of Services

Over the years, The River has expanded our services to reflect the changing needs of our community. Our services work together to fill gaps in food access and nutrition, and to improve the overall sustainability of area food systems by redirecting unused food to where it's needed most.

We currently offer:



CURBSIDE GROCERIES. A generous distribution of food and essentials at no cost to hundreds of households each week from the comfort of their vehicles.



FAMILY AT-HOME MEALS (FAM). A curbside meal program that provides all members of a household with nutritionally balanced to-go meals (available in both meat and vegetarian options) up to four days each week.



MUNCH. A mobile meals program that fills gaps in childhood nutrition by delivering free, healthy meals to children and adults living in low-income and underserved neighborhoods throughout Madison and Fitchburg.



RIVER DELIVERS. A contactless food delivery program that works with volunteers to reliably transport healthy groceries and meals to homebound residents of Dane County who are unable to access other food assistance programs.



ePANTRY. An online ordering system that focuses on promoting choice and expanding healthy food access by enabling clients to tailor a monthly grocery order to their household's specific needs. Includes culturally inclusive and medically recommended foods.



PANTRY EXPRESS. A streamlined pantry service on select Saturdays that does not require registration, which helps to reduce barriers and increase food access among vulnerable populations.



REDISTRIBUTION PARTNERS. A community program that launched once The River became the first authorized Redistribution Organization of Second Harvest Foodbank. This partnership allows us to provide regular donations of food and essentials to neighborhood organizations, many of which specialize in supporting members of historically marginalized populations.



FOOD RECOVERY. An extensive operation that rescues well over one million pounds of unused food and supplies each year from grocery and convenience stores, farmers markets, and more to nourish our community while minimizing waste.



// The Covid-19 pandemic showed firsthand the importance of organizations dedicated to the well-being of those across our community. That's why Dane County is proud to budget dollars to support The River Food Pantry. The River reflects who we are as a community; the empathy and care we have for one another. The foundation of healthy, vibrant communities is built on work done by groups like The River, and we need to ensure they have the resources to meet continually increasing needs."

—Joe Parisi, Dane County Executive

2023 Impact



Curbside Groceries: **40,688** orders



FAM: **111,234** to-go meals



Munch: **31,072** mobile meals



River Delivers: **3,232** deliveries



ePantry: **2,003** online orders



Pantry Express: **5,759** orders



Redistribution Partners: **37**



Food Recovery: **1.7** million pounds



Volunteers: **2,644**



Volunteer Hours: **41,305**

It's Time to Bring More to the Table

The River works hard to ensure our clients have reliable access to healthy, nourishing food. Yet despite our success, the unfortunate reality is that we are unable to serve everyone that requires assistance.

In some cases, our programs are already operating at capacity. In others, the need goes well beyond food, surpassing the scope of our current operations. Additional needs include both material goods, such as clothing and housewares, and access to life-changing services related to housing, healthcare,

employment, legal assistance, and counseling.

As a trusted partner in the community, The River has the potential to do so much more—both in its focus area of fighting food insecurity and in facilitating the wraparound services needed by those confronting complex barriers to physical, mental, and economic wellbeing.

What's keeping us from meeting our full potential as a critical community resource?

Our building.



Challenges include:

A SMALL SPACE THAT'S BURSTING AT THE SEAMS

At just 11,000 square feet, our current building constrains operational efficiency and has capped our organizational growth. We have worked diligently to use every bit of space as efficiently as possible for years, but we are simply out of room. Our overall lack of space is exacerbated by the design of the building—it was originally a warehouse, not a food pantry, and its layout reflects that. A purpose-designed building that more than doubles our operational space will both eliminate current limitations and support future growth.

OUTDATED AND INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE

We have reached the boundaries of our electrical grid. As a result, we can't install the additional coolers and commercial-grade kitchen we need to grow. Our antiquated HVAC system is inefficient, outdated, and expensive to run. As the pandemic has shown, this can severely impact our ability to create a safe, comfortable environment for staff, volunteers, and clients.

NO ROOM TO UNDERTAKE VALUABLE SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

We are planning for a variety of sustainability initiatives centered around energy conservation, reduced fuel use, and on-site composting in our new facility. To date, most of our sustainability efforts have focused on reducing food waste by rescuing and redirecting unused food from area businesses. Our planned facility will enable us to expand those efforts, while also pursuing other eco-friendly improvements, including cost-saving efficiencies in lighting and insulation.



// The River is both our largest partner, supporting hundreds of households daily, and our first redistribution organization, which allows them to distribute to other organizations we may not reach directly. Without The River as a strong partner, we won't get far. I encourage you to support them so they can continue to do their vital work in Dane County."

—Michelle Orge, CEO of Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin

Expanding to Nourish Our Neighbors

Our staff and volunteers have researched evolving client preferences, operational efficacy, optimal pantry locations, environmental concerns, and much more. Thanks to these extensive efforts, we have a proposed site and facility design that will meet our needs by addressing the following considerations:

Ease of Access for Clients

Client access is a priority for our new home. We are sandwiched between two Northside “food deserts,” as identified by the City of Madison, that persistently lack access to healthy food. In fact, over 72% of The River’s clients live in ZIP codes where the City has recognized an existing concentration of food insecurity.

Staying near our current facility will minimize disruptions for existing clients and allow The River to continue serving thousands of area residents who would struggle to access services in other parts of Madison. Fortunately, there is an available site that meets our needs right across the street from us!

Increased Capacity for Services

Our proposed facility will be approximately 32,500 square feet—more than twice the size of our current building. In this new space we will:

- **CONSTRUCT A COMMERCIAL-GRADE KITCHEN.** Our two meal programs, FAM and Munch, require us to freshly prepare large amounts of food onsite. The new kitchen will have the additional space we need for equipment and preparation, which will significantly improve our efficiency and position us for future meal production opportunities.
- **DELIVER SAFE, EFFICIENT SERVICE.** We have incorporated what we’ve learned in recent years to create an efficient drive-thru experience that’s safe and comfortable for volunteers, staff, and clients regardless of weather conditions. While the pandemic presented many challenges, it also

provided opportunities for testing new ideas, such as adapting our core pantry and meals services into an innovative curbside model. Our clients love this model so much that we’ve made it central to our ongoing services and new facility design.

- **IMPROVE SUSTAINABILITY.** The River has long wanted to embrace more forms of sustainability. Proposed projects include the installation of a solar-powered microgrid, geothermal system, a dedicated space for growing produce on-site, and the eventual transition to electric vehicles. Having a facility intentionally designed with sustainability in mind will make it possible to incorporate these elements over time.
- **BETTER MEET CURRENT NEEDS AND ACCOMMODATE FUTURE GROWTH.** The new facility will incorporate a dedicated space for the distribution of clothing and housewares—a popular service we had to cancel due to the pandemic. Flexible spaces will allow community partners to offer wraparound services that support our vision of a fully nourished community. Planned rooms will be used for additional storage, indoor dining, classrooms, and eventual staff growth.





Our Recipe for Hope Would Not Be Complete Without Your Generosity

The River has been a steady source of support and assistance to our neighbors during tough times. Hardships caused by systemic inequalities, increased housing costs, medical expenses, and job loss are real. We provide something that many Americans take for granted—reliable access to food—and we’ve long dreamed of being able to do even more to meet the diverse needs of our community. Creating a larger, purpose-built facility is a critical step in making that dream a reality.

Our *Recipe for Hope Campaign* has a goal of \$12 million to fund these components:



Land Purchase: \$1,000,000



Facility Construction: \$9,000,000



Program Support Fund: \$2,000,000

We have already raised **over \$11 million** in public and private support!

As someone who shares our belief that access to healthy food is a right, not a privilege, you are vital to this project! Hope for tomorrow must be nourished today, and your financial support will help build a pantry that sustains such hope well into the future.

Will you please join us with your gift today? Thanks to a generous donor, all donations of \$500 or more given to this campaign on or after May 15 will be MATCHED dollar for dollar up to \$150,000!

When we work together, a recipe for hope becomes a dish our whole community can share.



// Terri and I are proud to support The River Food Pantry and its vision of a fully nourished community because we believe access to healthy food should be a right, not a privilege. The River has grown and innovated to meet the increasing need, and now the biggest challenge it faces is the undersized space from which it works. We are excited to join everyone involved with The River to build a new facility, which will help it have an even greater impact in our community."

—Dave Beck-Engel, Campaign Co-Chair and Board Member



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