

# Blue Zones

“The food you eat can be either the safest and most powerful form of medicine or the slowest form of poison.” Ann Wigmore



Brighter Bites recently distributed fresh produce to more than 500 families at the Bethel Assembly of God in Immokalee, with the help of many community partners. FILE

## Fighting food insecurity in the face of uncertainty

**Sebastien Saitta**  
Blue Zones Project-Southwest Florida

During a time when our local food pantries are usually stocking up for hurricane season, we are instead finding them working to keep up with the growing demand for food assistance as the economic impact from the COVID-19 crisis is felt.

Fortunately, there are many in our local food system that have adapted quickly to the needs of our community and made sure that the insecurity of food supply would be fed almost overnight. While the efforts of our local food pantries, farmers, nonprofits, and schools combined with the generosity of the community have been instrumental in fighting food insecurity, there is still much assistance needed to keep up with the future demand.

“We are seeing an exponential demand for food distributions and our families are reporting that food insecurity has increased within their households and the overall community,” said Marcela Romero, Program Director for Brighter Bites - Southwest Florida, a local non-profit that distributes fresh produce to families in need.

“Even with the gradual reopening of the State, we still see at least 600 families at the Boys and Girls Club Immokalee and Naples drive through food distributions each week.” Marcela reports that before the pandemic, they saw a general food insecurity rate of 60 percent based on a parent survey received from the families they serve. This number has increased to nearly 90 percent since the pandemic began.

Brighter Bites has continued to meet up with the demand for food distribution through partnering with other organizations and businesses like Harry Chapin Food Bank and Three60 Market where they distribute 400 meals each week to families in need. They have also partnered with Winn-Dixie to provide \$100 worth of vouchers bi-weekly to families in need in Southwest Florida communities.

“While people recover from several weeks without a job and while they catch up with other bills, people are having to make a choice of whether to spend their money on food or other bills,” says Marcela. “That is why we are helping bring some peace of mind to families, we don’t want them to have to choose between food or a roof over their heads.”

Meals of Hope and Harry Chapin Food Bank have also experienced a surge in demand as they are tackling food insecurity throughout the pandemic. In early May, Meals of Hope has served more than 2,500 families in a week at their pantries and is seeing that number grow. Steve Popper, President and CEO of Meals of Hope reports that they have spent over \$350,000 in the last 6 weeks and could use help in raising funds.

Harry Chapin Food Bank has reported an

increase of \$1.5 million dollars a month in their operating budget, the majority of it used in purchasing additional food as they are experiencing reductions in food donations pre-pandemic levels. They also see the need for food distribution to increase during the summer as many impacted families with children that normally attend summer programs where they receive meals will not be able to since most have been cancelled.

Café of Life, a Bonita Springs charity that helps provide nutritional and supplemental assistance to those in need, has been in full operation since the beginning of the pandemic and is busier than ever.

“We have seen so many new faces,” said Marietta Bala, Chairperson, Board of Directors at Café of Life.

“More food than ever is needed as well as financial assistance for rent and utilities due to unemployment.”

Café of Life’s main focus throughout the pandemic is feeding those in need and has been providing a hot and nutritious meal at their site each day along with grocery and toiletry items. They have also extended their service to delivering these items daily to the outlying community to include migrant camps, underserved neighborhoods, and to senior homes in need.

Collier and Lee School Districts have ramped up their efforts to support the food needs of families with school aged children with their “grab & go” style meal distribution. Collier County Public Schools has been distributing meals daily at 27 different sites.

Amy Carroll, MBA, RD, Food & Nutrition Services Coordinator with the Lee County School District reports that they have served 908,374 meals at more than 40 locations between March 23rd and May 14th. “We did see a gradual increase which has tapered off the past couple weeks and remained steady,” said Amy. “We are thankful to have had the resources to feed our students during this time of emergency and will continue to do so throughout the summer.”

COVID-19 has shown that food insecurity has not just affected those below the poverty line. Thomas P. Felke, MSW, Ph.D., Chair, BSW Program Coordinator, & Associate Professor of Social Work at Florida Gulf Coast University has done some research to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on those not only at the lowest tier of the socio-economic scale but also those who were just above that tier prior to this crisis. “It is not generally known or reported that 60% of the households receiving SNAP benefits in the Southwest Florida area are actually households with incomes above the poverty line,” he says. “Economists are predicting that the long-term financial impacts of this crisis may be felt two generations past where we are now for those in the lowest tiers.” He notes that this will be a major factor for us to consider in Southwest Florida as much of our

economy is built on tourism, which includes retail and service industries wherein many low paying jobs are sited.

While the efforts to provide food to individuals in our local communities has been significant and necessary to support those in need, Felke suggests that this pandemic has shown us the need to start addressing food insecurity from a more holistic approach. “A comprehensive approach should include affordable housing, living wages, and a focus on supporting individual self-sufficiency,” he says. “So many organizations and our local school districts have been outstanding in their efforts to support our neighbors, however, we cannot expect them to continue to shoulder this burden without providing a genuine framework from which we can expect individuals to thrive.”

### How to donate

Brighter Bites Southwest Florida: To donate, visit [BrighterBites.org](http://BrighterBites.org) and direct donations to SWFL in the comment section. To volunteer, email [Marcela.Romero@BrighterBites.org](mailto:Marcela.Romero@BrighterBites.org)

Meals of Hope: To donate, visit [MealsofHope.org](http://MealsofHope.org).

Harry Chapin Food Bank: To donate, visit [Donate.HarryChapinFoodBank.org](http://Donate.HarryChapinFoodBank.org).

Café of Life: To donate, visit [CafeofLife.org/Donate](http://CafeofLife.org/Donate).

### Online Power Nine activity of the week

Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida wants to know how you are living the Power 9, a set of shared principles followed by the longest-lived people.

Each week, we will have a specific Power 9 activity for you to try and share with us.

This week’s Power 9 activity is Purpose.

Research has found that having a sense of purpose can make a big difference when navigating difficult times, and help us be more resilient.

This week, we encourage you to make a difference by reaching out to someone you know who might be at risk of loneliness. Give them a call to let them know that you are thinking of them. Ask how they are doing and if they need anything. Consider staying in touch by periodically sending them a card, email, a joke or video.

Share your experience with us; send us a picture, video or a story by telling us how you reached out to someone who may be lonely. How did it make you or that person feel? Share on Facebook and be sure to tag us at [@BlueZonesProjectSouthwestFlorida](https://www.facebook.com/BlueZonesProjectSouthwestFlorida). You can also send directly to [bluezonesprojectswfl@sharecare.com](mailto:bluezonesprojectswfl@sharecare.com).

Share your story by Sunday, May 31st to be entered into a prize drawing for Dan Buettner’s book, “The Blue Zones of Happiness”.