Food Giveaways Help Bridge Fresno’s Food Gap

Hunger and lack of access to food is a serious problem in Fresno County. **One in four** people living in Fresno County suffer from hunger. About **one in six** residents don’t know from one day to the next whether or not they will have enough to eat. Fresno County belongs to one of the largest and most productive agricultural regions in the world, so it is a paradox that nearly 25 percent of Fresno County residents are hungry.

A Farm to Table initiative through the Fresno County Partnerships to Improve Community Health Program is dedicated to bridging Fresno’s “food gap.” Leading partner, Fresno Metro Ministry (Metro), is at the forefront of the initiative. Metro has created strong collaborations with farmers, growers, food distributors, churches, community based organizations and other key stakeholders that has resulted in a solid network that moves excess nutritious food to neighborhoods who are in most need.

Metro’s innovative “Food to Share” program operates similarly to a hybrid food bank. Food is donated and recovered from farmers, growers, food distributors, restaurants, the Community Food Bank, Central Unified School District and other institutions via the Food to Share Network website [www.foodtoshare.org](http://www.foodtoshare.org). The donated food is transferred to local churches and non-profits in six Fresno neighborhoods in greatest need. The donated and recovered food is then distributed for free by volunteers. These neighborhoods are all in the heart of food deserts, where residents lack access to healthy foods.

On May 27, 2016, Metro held its first food giveaway at Fresno Christian Reformed Church where the number of recipients receiving fresh fruits and vegetables doubled from 60 to 120. Nearly 10,000 lbs. of fruits and vegetables were distributed to families on that day. Children in local afterschool programs also benefited from this distribution. A second food giveaway took place just days later at St. Rest Baptist Church, where over 200 families benefited. Since then, 14 distributions have taken place and as word gets out, the numbers continue to climb.

Once a month, at each of the fruit and vegetable giveaways in the six neighborhoods, Metro conducts food demos with the donated and recovered food being given away, so that residents can learn how to use the nutritious foods in their own kitchens as a healthy snack or meal. Through consistent canvassing, outreach and marketing, Metro has reached a goal of increasing resident access to food distributions in the neighborhoods by an average of 25 percent at each site.
“It’s about creating the awareness, relationships and logistics needed to avoid wasting significant amounts of nutritious food and getting it to people who are regularly in need of food assistance for their families,” says Keith Bergthold, Fresno Metro Ministry Executive Director. “Together we can make a big dent in Fresno’s extraordinarily high levels of food insecurity and nutrition deficits.”

“We used to serve about 60 families a month with our regular distribution and now with the access to fruits and vegetables, we are serving nearly three times that amount,” says Pastor Henry Lengkeek of Fresno Christian Reformed Church. “Food to Share has made a tremendous difference for the families in our neighborhood.”

Volunteers are key to making the distributions successful. Currently, Metro relies on 46 volunteers to help glean fruits and vegetables, bag donated and recovered food and distribute these items to thousands of families living in the following school neighborhoods: Addams Elementary, Lowell Elementary, Martin Luther King, Jr Elementary, John Muir Elementary, Wolters Elementary and Homan Elementary.

For more information or to volunteer or donate food, please visit www.foodtoshare.org or contact Fresno Metro Ministry at (559) 485-1416.