



## EXCITING NEWS: Drive-up Curbside Registration and Pickup

As of Monday, November 17th, we began offering curbside registration and food package pickup. Since mid-March, staff and volunteers have been serving patrons from the side door on Sumner St. While this location provided safety from the traffic on Causeway Boulevard, the side-entry step created some logistical challenges when bringing food packages out on a cart.

In July, The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DTCAP) announced CARES Act funding opportunities for food banks and food pantries. Together with Channel One Food Bank and Feeding Wisconsin, WAFER was able to submit a proposal which was approved for nearly \$50,000 for a piece of equipment, implementation of a mobile patron registration system, and funds to build a temporary structure to continue outside distribution through the harsh winter months. Outside distribution or curbside pickup has been recommended by the TEFAP advisory committee (aka government commodities) since mid-March and despite the of weather (snow, rain, cold). As cases increased throughout the state and locally, the advisory committee recommended food pantries continue curbside distribution through April 2021. It became necessary to change distribution methods to comply with directives and provide patrons a safe way to wait for registration (typical wait time is 30 minutes), offer a way to load groceries directly into the vehicle versus carting groceries to the parking lot on the other side of the building, and provide a safe space for staff and volunteers to provide service for 3-4 hours at a time.



Many businesses and individuals in our community made it possible to complete this project prior to DATCP grant deadlines. The Board of Directors wishes to thank Fowler and Hammer, Architect and Board Member Mike Swinghammer, Hwy 35 Signs, La Crosse Tent and Awning, Klich Electric, Bernie's Equipment, KMAX Solutions, and WAFER's dedicated staff and volunteers.

DATCP funding covered a portion of the proposed expenses, but the La Crosse Area Emergency Response Fund governed by La Crosse Community Foundation and United Way, and the Quillin Fund of The La Crosse Community Foundation stepped up to cover the remainder. We are grateful for a community that recognizes the value and importance WAFER has for thousands of people in our local communities!

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## A Note From The Director

As I write my final column for the year I pause to think about how much has changed since January. The year began in a less frenzied pace than normal. The typical 3-4 weeks it takes to recover from the holiday season of increased giving—individuals, retailers, Rotary Lights—seemed easier. What I will remember 2020 as after that point will be somewhat of a blur. In a recent conversation with one of the staff I used the phrase “we just *do*”. We do what needs to be done, push through despite exhaustion from an increased workload and decreased volunteer help, and just make sure we are serving people as best as we can. It wasn’t until mid-summer that I finally felt like we could all breathe a little and realized all we had already survived. I don’t mean to be dramatic, but when I heard the stories of frontline workers I knew that that was our story too. Feeding people is a hard job always, feeding people in the midst of a global pandemic became exponentially harder. I worried about the staff. How long would they hold up? I worried about the volunteers that remained. How would they hold up having to do more to accomplish the same goal? I worried about our patrons. Do they know we are still here to help them? Are they too afraid to come out to get the food they need because they are, as a population, more at risk because of generally poorer health and chronic health conditions with less access to healthcare? Yet here we are 8 months later and we are still pressing forward, adapting along the way.

Despite the challenges created by the pandemic there have been opportunities as well.

In the last 8 months the Mobile Pantry has become an even more valuable program. New partnerships and relationships have been formed as we come together to serve people better. We have added two new regular sites to the Mobile Pantry Schedule—The Parenting Place and Rivercrest Mobile Home Park. Additionally, we were able to accompany the Coulee Region Immigrant Task Force at outreach events and make a connection with underserved populations.



After putting the Nutrition Education and Tools Program in-person sessions on hold we have finally resumed programming albeit virtually. Our nutrition education partners, Viterbo Dietetic Students and UW-Extension Nutrition Educators (Mary and Karie), developed new curriculum to reconnect with our patrons. These sessions look a little different not just because they are virtual, but because they include relevant material for cooking during a pandemic and using what you have.

For years, maybe even decades, we used a specially written database to track patron and donation information. As the system aged we started experiencing glitches on both the patron and the donor side. Little by little we started losing functionality and it became necessary to transition to a new system before all of the historical data was lost. After much research, conversations with other food pantries, and demonstrations, we settled on a Wisconsin-based company that specializes in applications specifically for food pantries. The transition couldn’t have been better or more timely. As food pantry requests started to slowly increase we needed a more efficient way to serve people. Having staff running in and out of the building to get each household registered was definitely inefficient. The new system allows our Client Coordinators, Diane and Laura, to take a device outside to register people in the street. Wow! Check-in time was cut nearly in half and patrons didn’t have to wait as long to receive their food. With the curbside structure in place Laura and Diane are able to register people right at the window. After registration the patron pulls ahead to the (will be covered area) conveyor where the volunteer slides their package out a window. No waiting outside in rain or –20 January weather, no hauling groceries around the building to the parking lot, and staff and volunteers have a comfortable and safe workspace.

Speaking of the new system, the donor portion is still under “construction”. My hope is to send acknowledgment/tax receipt letters in the next few weeks. The developer is very close to finishing this project. I just want you to know I haven’t forgotten about your gifts or how meaningful they are, but we need to get this done right the first time to ensure a smooth transition for years to come.

Friends, the end of the year is quickly approaching. Just as I pause to reflect on challenges I also pause to reflect on the enormous amount of support and encouragement you have given in the last year. Your kind words, uplifting encouragement, and concern have touched our staff. I post your notes for the staff to read and be encouraged by. They were and are a welcome reprieve on the toughest of days. Time and again you see the good work and impact that happens at WAFER (see *More Than “Just” A Food Pantry* on the next page for a high-level view of services), then you choose to stand with us to make a difference for families and individuals right here at home. Your financial and food gifts put food on the table for people who don’t always know where their next meal will come from. As we continue to face uncertain times I hope that you will consider continuing to support the critical service WAFER provides for thousands of people each month. That old saying ‘it takes a village’ is more evident this year than ever before. I am thankful I get to be a part of that village with you!

Sending my warmest wishes to you and your loved ones this Christmas season. May you find peace, joy, wonder, and gratitude for each blessing great or small.

In Service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Erin Waldhart'.

Erin Waldhart, Executive Director



## More Than “Just” A Food Pantry

Quite often WAFER staff and board members hear “I didn’t know that WAFER does.....”. It is true, WAFER is more than “just” a food pantry. In addition to general food package distribution at the pantry at the Causeway Boulevard location, WAFER provides services/programs to address the varying and changing needs of the many populations served. Food packages contain non-perishables, dairy products, frozen meat, bakery, produce, and personal care items.

The longest operating program focuses on *Asian* families. For more than a decade five basic staples have been purchased to substitute for the more “American” foods. Rice, two varieties of rice noodles, fish sauce, and bamboo shoots are offered to Asian families.

The second longest operating program is *Senior Share*, pre-packed and personalized food package delivery to seniors 60+. Food packages include non-perishables, meat, eggs, and produce when large quantities are in stock. Many seniors struggle with physical limitations or transportation issues which create barriers for securing food. Each month, 80 seniors benefit from this program.

The *Mobile Food Pantry* began service in September 2017. This retrofitted transit bus is a food pantry on wheels, complete with coolers and freezers, and capable of transporting all elements of the food package. To start, we targeted rural and concentrated areas of poverty. After three years this program is even more critical, providing food packages to 250+ households at ~20 unique sites monthly. This vehicle is cutting edge in the food insecurity world and as a result there have been inquiries from program starters throughout the country who are interested in replicating this concept. It is exciting to think that our concept could revolutionize how hunger is addressed!



*Feeding Today’s Youth—Bangor School District* backpack program sends food home with students who likely struggle to get enough food outside of school. Students receive a take-home pack one or two times per week. The pack contains pre-made and individually portioned meals and snacks to reduce food prep injuries and provide the nourishment needed to return to school ready to learn instead of focused on the next opportunity to eat. This program is in its 7th year and serves 40-50 children weekly.

To be continued in the next edition.....Saturday Food Fair, nutrition education, and food rescue.

## Mail, Online, Apps: Giving In A COVID World

COVID has changed the landscape of giving, not just what but how. Food and monetary donations are the backbone to fulfill any mission. However, in recent years and in some cases recent months, the ways to support your favorite charities has evolved to include a variety of options. Giving through the website via PayPal, Network for Good, or ActBlue online and mailing a check are still great options, but here are some additional ways in which people have been supporting WAFER.

There are businesses who match their employees charitable donations such as Xcel Energy or provide opportunities for their employees to choose which organizations to support with grant funds such as River Bank and RSM. Thrivent Financial engages their members through a grant program to support charitable activities (Thrivent Action Teams) or to provide direct support (Thrivent Choice Dollars).

Financial institutions, such as Citizens State Bank and Altra Federal Credit Union, offer opportunities to give back as well. Citizens State Bank engages WE CARE account members when they designate a non-profit to support. Alta Federal Credit Union encourages employee volunteerism, community engagement, and has now partnered with NetGiver, a direct donation app. The app provides credit union members secure and fee-free donation options to their favorite charities. With the fee-free NetGiver app, charities receive 100% of the donation which is up to 7% more compared to other platforms that typically charge a processing fee. Cheryl Dutton, VP of Marketing at Altra Federal Credit Union had this to say, “It is with great excitement that we are engaging the power of our membership and strengthening our dedication to the organizations that serve our community.”

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Erin Waldhart  
Executive Director  
Brad Gerdes  
Operations Manager  
Sanya Frescura  
Mobile Pantry Manager





403 Causeway Blvd  
La Crosse, WI 54603  
608.782.6003  
waferlacrosse.org  
info@waferlacrosse.org

Facebook.com/WAFERlacrosse

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WAFER is a United Way Partner Agency

## Our Mission:

Responding to God's love, WAFER provides food and works to eliminate hunger.

# How You Can Help Now

**VOLUNTEER | DONATE FOOD | DONATE ONLINE**

Call, click or visit WAFER to volunteer and donate food.

Donate online at [www.waferlacrosse.org](http://www.waferlacrosse.org) and  
use the PayPal link .

**If you would like to write a check to donate,  
please use the envelope enclosed.**

# Thank you!