



Sample press release

The Nation's Largest Food Drive Re-emerges This Week in Novel Fashion

As summer approaches, local food banks and church shelves normally would be well-stocked, benefiting from the 70 million-plus pounds of food recently received from the Letter Carriers' annual Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive, held in May for the past 27 years.

The food drive's timing is key, because winter holiday donations have dwindled from food pantries and homeless shelters, and school meal programs are not available in summer. The coronavirus pandemic, however, forced the postponement of the scheduled May 9 drive for safety reasons—even as the pandemic-related economic shutdown has worsened food insecurity.

To deal with this urgent situation, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) has developed a new plan to address the problem of hunger that affects one in eight Americans, including millions of children, elderly and military veterans.

Starting this week, millions of generous Americans who normally leave food by their mailbox on the second Saturday in May for letter carriers to collect, as well as the legions of community volunteers who help sort and transport the food, can accomplish the same thing via different means.

Using the experience, contacts, presence in every zip code in the country and universal network that have made the Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive the country's largest single-day food collection, the NALC reached out to our numerous regional/state food coordinators, who in turn contacted our 1,900 branches in every corner of the country about finding a new approach for the times. The branches then spoke with food banks and pantries in their communities, and we identified ones those that are willing and able to take part in this effort.

The result: A novel donor drive approach to fit the current circumstances. Americans in big cities and suburbs, in small towns and rural areas, can go to a website set up just for this, select a food bank close to them, and donate funds to help the pantry purchase food. This has been set up in a manner that allows every dollar raised to go directly to purchasing food for the hungry.

As always, the food procured will stay in the community to help residents in need. And again, our wonderful national partners—the U.S. Postal Service, United Way Worldwide, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), Kellogg Co., National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, CVS Health, Valpak, AFL-CIO and Valassis—will be vital to its success.

This isn't our normal food drive, of course, but these aren't normal times. As letter carriers in every neighborhood in the country six and seven days a week, we see the needs and we cannot wait while food banks struggle, demand grows and people remain hungry. Once it is safe, we will return to the traditional food drive.

For the meantime, there may be a silver lining to this approach born of necessity. Rather than a one-day event, this effort will continue as needed. And, food banks can purchase more food than a resident could buy and donate with the same resources.

To be sure, this approach is different than before. But for individuals and families across the United States able to have a meal because of the generosity of others, the nourishment—and gratitude—will be exactly the same as before.

Media Plan for Letter Carriers Regarding the Food Donor Drive

Over the next week or more, starting Monday (June 15) we should focus on getting the message about the food donor drive out to regional newspapers in key states. That will help with the drive itself as well as with our political/legislative/financial goals. This is especially so because local TV affiliates and radio stations tend to repeat what metro newspapers report, and because lawmakers often take more seriously what appears in major local news outlets than on the national level, since they know their constituents back home are seeing/reading/hearing it. Moreover, when a paper on the ground covers an effort like this, it's not abstract to them; rather it's personal, it directly affects their readers, it's about their communities—and the stories often reflect that.

Here are some practical points:

1-This outreach to metro/regional newspapers is best done by our folks in the state, including branches, because they'll be familiar with their own region and with these news outlets, and because the outlets will be more receptive to local residents. That said, HQ could supply them with pertinent information and, if requested, with advice on dealing with those outlets.

2-Re: process; our folks often seek to get their voices into newspapers through the editorial pages, with letters to the editor or commentaries. But here, we're promoting a news story and not our point of view, so the best approach is to reach out to the newsroom for news coverage by a reporter. That involves calling the City Desk or Metro Desk and speaking to the city editor or metro editor. Don't settle for a news aide or a receptionist asking you to email or fax your query. Speak directly to a city or assistant city editor or a metro or assistant metro editor, or at least a reporter, and describe what the news is (don't call late in the afternoon because they'll be on deadline). If they tell you to provide additional info via fax or email, that's fine. To find specific phone numbers and names to reach them in the first place, try the paper's web site. If not, simply google, for example, Kansas City Star staff directory to get those names/numbers. If no luck, dial the paper's general number or newsroom number and ask for City Desk or the Metro Desk. Again, it's important to speak to a journalist (not a receptionist) and to get guidance on how to proceed, rather than just faxing or emailing something cold to a frenetic newsroom that may well not bother looking at it.

3-Re: content; what you tell them will influence whether this is ignored by the paper or ends up as a Page One story that then gets additional coverage by local TV and radio. The key is to show the editors/reporters you speak to why they should care about the story. The way to do that is to take the major themes from the press release about the importance of the food drive every year, both for the tens of thousands of Kansas Citians or Missourians who contribute every year and for the large number of residents of KC and Missouri who rely on the food; the fact that the very pandemic that forced the food drive's postponement this year has increased the problem of hunger in the state; the hungry Americans include millions of children, elderly and military veterans; the creative approach the letter carriers have devised this year, given the pandemic, to meet those needs. etc. Let them know that this is fresh, brand-new news—and that, moreover, it is something their readers can act on. Important tip—do not focus on the website aspect (paragraph 6 in the press release) because if it sounds like the news is that we're sending folks to a website, it won't seem like a story. The prior paragraph (5), is more important in terms of the logistical aspect. Also, let them know they can keep tabs on this as it proceeds and write follow-up stories on the impact—journalists like that because it provides built-in material for future stories.

4-Both in the initial approach and in any follow-up information, a key is to help journalists localize the story, which makes it a bigger, better and more relevant story for them. Here are two quick ways to do that. First, tell them how much food generous Missourians donated last year, which shows both how committed to/interested in the Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive the paper's readers are, and also shows the gap that local food banks now face without our food drive last month. HQ should be able to give you those figures. Second, tell them how many Kansas Citians/Missourians lack sufficient food; i.e. need this effort. You can do the math. Missouri's 6.1 million population is 2 percent of the U.S. population of 330 million. Meanwhile, 40 million Americans are affected by hunger; So, assuming Missouri fits the national picture, 2 percent of 40 million yields a figure of about 800,000 Missourians going hungry. If you want to further localize it; the Kansas City metro area's 2 million residents constitute one-third of the state's residents; one-third of 800,000 suggests that more than a quarter-million folks in the KC metro area face food issues. Collect these figures/do this math before you talk to an editor or reporter, and you can make a compelling case with few words about why this story matters to them. (Caution: Journalists are notoriously bad with numbers. There's an old joke about a placard in a newsroom that reads: Danger, journalist doing math. So, speak slowly and pause often if you give them any figures.)

5-Be prepared to provide whomever the paper assigns to report on the story with names/contact info of a few local postal folks involved in/familiar with the food drive and hunger issues whom the reporter can interview. That list can also include food bank directors, homeless shelters, etc. that you know would be able to discuss how important the Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive is, how big the current need and challenges are, and that this current effort might help. And let the editor know that you can provide that info to the reporter. By so doing, you'll make it more likely the paper will tackle the story, that the reporter will do a good job, and that he'll get our voice in there—in all three ways, you'll be helping our cause. And if you're willing to talk to the paper, make sure to provide your contact information.

6-Once the paper does a story, you might follow up or have another letter carrier up follow up with a letter to the editor or a commentary piece, praising/adding to/clarifying the story. By piggybacking on the news story this way, you'll draw still more attention to our food effort. To do so, call the editorial page editor, talk to him/her personally, ask for guidance about whether a letter or a commentary would be better. Benefits: The editor will know you're an actual local person, will be invested in what you eventually send because he gave you advice, and will likely provide his personal email address in addition to the generic one on the website, and will be on the lookout for it. By so doing, you'll increase your chances of being published from about 5 percent to about 95 percent (assuming what you write is crisp, concise and factual).

7-If you need help with any of this, contact NALC Director of Media Relations Phil Dine or Community Services Director Christina Vela Davidson.