



St. Mary's partnership brings food distributions back to Tónaaneesdizí

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PHOTO: Three tractor-trailer trucks full of donated food items were delivered to Tuba City on the Navajo Nation on Tuesday. The food boxes were distributed by St. Mary's Food Bank with the help of volunteers utilizing a 'no-contact' food distribution model developed by the organization.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The Office of the Speaker and members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council partnered with St. Mary's Food Bank to restart community food distribution in the Tónaaneesdizí (Tuba City) Chapter on Tuesday.

The collaboration began in mid-March after St. Mary's notified Navajo liaisons of the ability to conduct a large mobile pantry capable of serving 2,000 Navajo Nation families. St. Mary's shared that, though it has lost most of its grocery rescue and food drive donations during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has seen an increase in donations from restaurants and distributors who now have more ample supplies.

"I'm glad that St. Mary's Food Bank, the Office of the Speaker and the Navajo Nation Council has worked together to make these deliveries possible during these hard times in Tuba City and surrounding chapters. The Navajo Nation Council will continue to work with St. Mary's Food Bank to ensure that we get food to the people who need this help," said Tónaaneesdizí Council Delegate Otto Tso.

St. Mary's dispatched three tractor-trailer trucks from its main warehouse in Phoenix Tuesday morning carrying more than 90,000 pounds of food. The trucks arrived at the Western Agency Fair Grounds in Tuba City where the food box distribution was staged. Families were able to drive up to the distribution location to receive food without needing to exit their vehicle.

Each family received one box filled with non-perishable food items and another box with shelf stable fruits and vegetables. Together, the food boxes help to ensure more families can make meals at home as the pandemic continues.

"The efforts of St. Mary's Food Bank, the local volunteers and volunteers from all over are truly



PHOTO: With assistance from local leaders, volunteers and the Navajo Nation Police Department, more than 900 households were assisted by noon. The line of vehicles, representing a household each, was noted to span more than five miles at one point during the day Tuesday.

heroic. These food boxes will make an immeasurable impact in slowing the spread of COVID-19 in our communities,” said Speaker Seth Damon. “To the many donors that contributed to St. Mary’s Food Bank and who made this possible, the Navajo Nation owes you a debt of gratitude for contributing positively to the health and wellbeing of our People.”

St. Mary’s has regularly delivered food to Navajo communities since before the COVID-19 pandemic. By noon on Tuesday, the food bank’s mobile pantry operation had served over 900 families. St. Mary’s noted that Tuesday marked the largest mobile pantry distribution in its history.

The Office of the Speaker identified early-on that St. Mary’s willingness to provide web-based training for its no-contact distribution model was an opportunity to help community members become involved. St. Mary’s worked to expand its normal training platform to facilitate a greater number of participants in an effort to address the growing need for volunteers.

In March, St. Mary’s told the Office of the Speaker on a teleconference call that it recently had to close its Tuba City and Chinle food distribution sites because their normal volunteer helpers consisted mainly of elderly community members. Those elder volunteers were encouraged to stay home as the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread throughout the southwest region.

Legislative staff began spreading the message of St. Mary’s training opportunities as a means to recruit the needed help to reestablish the distribution site in Tuba City. Legislative branch staff also began coordinating weekly calls with St. Mary’s food bank to identify opportunities to expand food delivery locations to underserved areas, leading to Tuesday’s largest-ever distribution.

The distribution was possible with the coordinated efforts of St. Mary’s Food Bank, local leaders, the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety and other partners.

Members of the general public that wish to sign up to volunteer with St. Mary’s can do so on the food bank’s website at www.stmarysfoodbank.org. The Navajo Nation Council encourages all prospective volunteers in the nation’s COVID-19 relief efforts to undergo proper training and guidance to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

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