Food Finders- Food Bank: Who Are We?

Founded in 1981, Food Finders- Food Bank (FFFB) has provided food to member agencies, advocated for the hungry, and educated the public about hunger-related issues in Tippecanoe and 15 surrounding counties in North Central Indiana.

FFFB distributes more than 7.5 million pounds of food on average to non-profit organizations in 16 counties that FFFB serves. FFFB is funded by United Way, foundations, grants, the USDA, corporations, sponsors, and individual donors.

Ms. Katie Powell, the Associate Program Director at Food Finders- Food Bank, shares with us about Food Finders from an insider perspective.

Q: How long have you been working with Food Finders? What is your role as the Associate Program Director?

A: I started working at Food Finders in March of 2016. As the Associate Program Director, I oversee three of our direct service programs: the JP Lisack Community Food Pantry, our Educational Programming, and Resource Coordination, which includes but is not limited to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach. The beautiful part of these three programs is that they complement one another so well. The pantry offers emergency food assistance to hungry members of our community, while coordinated resources and educational classes at Food Finders offer community members the skills to be food secure and self-sufficient. Our programs address hunger through immediate and long term solutions.

Q: What are some highlight programs that Food Finders offers to the community?

A: For the year of 2017, Food Finders is working hard to expand programs that target special populations and extend our reach in rural areas of North Central Indiana.

- The Mobile Pantry Program delivers pantry foods via a truck that includes a pop-up style pantry and can distribute more than 5,000 pounds of food in less than two hours

- The BackPack Program delivers nutritious foods and recipes to low-income, school-aged children and their families over the weekend

- Senior Grocery Program ensures senior citizens always have food staples within their reach.
Q: What outcomes has Food Finders seen through its work?
A: Our big goal, what has been dubbed the "Bold Goal," is to end hunger in our community by 2025. Every year we are making progress towards this goal, but our success depends upon financial and volunteer support from our community. In 2016, with the generous support of our volunteers and donors, we were able to open a new Food Resource & Education Center that houses a food pantry, classroom space, and a demonstration kitchen. We have partnered with 120 agencies across our 16 county service area, served more than 30,000 households through the Mobile Pantry, offered 3,000 students monthly food over the weekend with the Backpack Program, and provided more than 400 senior grocery bags to low-income senior citizens.

Q: What are some challenges that you have faced in your position? How did you handle the problems?
A: Some of the biggest challenges I've faced involve raising awareness of our programs in the community. For instance, the food pantry and our educational programs rely mostly on volunteers to operate successfully. There have been times when we've planned for five volunteers to show up for a shift in the pantry, but only three of them are able to make it. Because the pantry serves such large numbers of clients every day, the difference between three and five volunteers can really set us back from operating at our full potential.

While we don't blame our volunteers (people get sick, family emergencies come up, life gets busy!), we have been working diligently to have enough trained volunteers on hand so that if one or two volunteers do not show up, we aren't in a worse off position. We've been connecting with church groups, student groups (both at Purdue and in high schools), as well as with the general public to highlight different ways a person can help Food Finders. In the pantry, volunteers must commit to showing up regularly. However, we also have other volunteer opportunities that require little to no ongoing commitment.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about the on-site food pantry?
A: Food Finders has worked in partnership with pantries across our 16-county service area for a long time, but in July of 2016 we decided to open our own, on-site food pantry. When Food Finders' executive team was brainstorming ways to fill the food gap in Tippecanoe County (food insecurity in Tippecanoe is around 16.4%, more than 1% higher than the national rate), one solution was to distribute food directly to the people who needed it most. What better way to do this than to open our own pantry? The JP Lisack Community Food Pantry serves over 5,000lbs of food per day to almost 300 households.

While residents of Tippecanoe County may come to this pantry as often as they like, we're finding that the average pantry client is only coming to the pantry once per month. We've also set up our pantry to be an entry point into more long-term services. When folks come into our pantry, they learn about classes they can take to make foods last longer and to save money, they get connected to a Resource Coordinator to address ongoing barriers to food security, and they find out about community resources that are going to help them become more self-sufficient.
Q: What do you like about working at Food Finders?

A: As an organization, Food Finders has developed a very welcoming culture – for employees, for volunteers, and for clients. We take our mission very seriously, but we don't take ourselves too seriously. That attitude is one of my favorite parts of working at Food Finders.

Q: If you could change one thing about Food Finders, what would it be?

A: Although there is no shortage of innovative solutions to addressing hunger at Food Finders, we do have limited means with which to implement these solutions. If I could change one thing about Food Finders, it would be to have unlimited financial resources. We've become very good at leveraging the resources we have at our disposal to connect with the highest number of people possible, but imagine what we could do with even more resources!

Q: Can you tell me how Food Finders cooperates with other non-profit organizations in Indiana to serve the community?

A: When talking about the on-site food pantry that Food Finders operates, I mentioned that the pantry is an entry point to more long term services. Part of being an entry point means that we are collaborating with other area agencies to be a one-stop shop for our clients. Earlier this month the pantry hosted a health navigator from Affiliated Service Providers of Indiana, Inc. (ASPIN). We also offered a tenants' rights class through HomesteadCS, in which staff members from Lafayette Transitional Housing Center offers their expertise in the pantry every weekday.

Food Finder's Food Resource & Education Center has worked with a number of agencies to connect clients from financial management skills, healthy living knowledge, to information on continuing education and job skills. Food Finders also regularly partners with other non-profits to host Mobile Pantry distributions and to set up additional pantries.

Q: What significant changes do you expect to see in the near future for Food Finders?

A: Food Finders is in the process of creating a more robust SNAP outreach program – a project that I am particularly excited about. Over the coming months, Food Finders will be able to send a team of SNAP Outreach to Mobile Pantries and other agencies to ensure that qualified individuals are signed up for SNAP. Our federal safety net includes SNAP as a cornerstone program that allows clients to purchase foods that meet their particular dietary needs. We will also offer SNAP resources and technological support for agencies that provide SNAP application assistance to their own clients.
Programs at Food Finders- Food Bank

Agency Partner Program
Food Finders' flagship Agency Partner Program provides the single largest source of food for over 160 hunger relief agencies such as food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters, among others. These agencies are a consistent source of free meals and groceries for hungry families within their communities, and provide services and referral mechanisms to additional public and private sources of support. From January to December, 2014, Food Finders distributed more than four million pounds of food and household products through these agencies, totaling 65 percent of total food distribution.

BackPack Program
In Indiana, one in five children struggles with hunger – kids enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs are often left with little or no food during the weekends. The BackPack Program ensures that these children have something to eat between Friday afternoon and Monday morning. Each Friday, students enrolled in the program receive a backpack filled with nutritious, non-perishable, and kid-friendly food. Teams of volunteer Packing Partners fill the bags each week. The BackPack Program is made possible through volunteers, generous donations, and grants.

Summer Food Service Program
Food Finders’ Summer Food Service Program provides meals and groceries to food insecure children during summer break. The meals are served on-site in low-income neighborhoods and community locations. The program hopes to alleviate the financial pressure to provide meals that are usually served as free school lunches during a school year. In 2015, more than 22,000 meals were served in communities spanning six counties.

Mobile Pantry Outreach Program
The Food Finders Mobile Pantry Outreach Program takes a truckload of food out in all 16 counties to reach the people in need while supplementing the work of other hunger relief agencies. The truck is filled with a variety of items (fresh produce, meat, baked goods, etc.), and works in a “farmers’ market” style.

Senior Grocery Program
Launched in 2013, Food Finders’ Senior Grocery Program serves four sites across its 16-county region, bringing monthly deliveries of staple items to area seniors struggling with food insecurity due to dietary requirements and mobility challenges.

Information taken from: https://www.food-finders.org/programs/

How Can You Contact Food Finders- Food Bank?

Food Finders Food Bank Food Resource & Education Center (FREC)
1204 Greenbush Street
Lafayette, IN 47904
(765) 471-0062

Food Finders Food Bank Food Warehouse
1210 N. 10th Street
Lafayette, IN 47904

Or check out their website for more information:
https://www.food-finders.org/