

The History of Second Harvest Community Food Bank

In the spring of 1981, thousands of St. Joseph residents were unemployed. Although the official unemployment rate was reported at 12 percent, the actual rate was closer to 20 percent. The plight of the unemployed worsened as unemployment benefits ran out and cuts were made in other social service programs. A number of calls were made to the United Way of Greater St. Joseph Information and Referral line from persons who had witnessed the dumping of hundreds of boxes of seemingly good food at the city landfill. An unrelated call was received from a family whose husband and father had been arrested for taking cans of food from the dumpster of a local supermarket.

On September 21, 1981, a Certificate of Incorporation was issued and filed as Harvesters Food Bank of St. Joseph, Inc. The purpose of the organization was to provide a central clearing house through which the food industry and others could donate edible surplus food and other items. This, in turn, would help to solve emergency food needs of low-income persons and reduce costs of charities by providing them with surplus or salvage food.

In 1982, Jack Habig was selected as the first executive director and the food bank received 501c(3) non-profit status. By 1983, the organization was officially operating as a food bank. Nearly 160,000 pounds of food were distributed to 41 agencies that year. A van was purchased for transporting donated goods to the food bank in 1984, allowing distribution to grow to 300,000 pounds. In 1985, Jim Long was appointed the second executive director of the food bank.

The food bank became more important than ever in 1993. Many St. Joseph residents were in need of emergency help with the now infamous flood of 1993. The food bank became a warehouse and clearinghouse for over 270,000 pounds of flood relief product. Also that year, two major plants in St. Joseph closed, leaving thousands without jobs.

The year 1994 saw many changes at the food bank. A capital campaign was launched and the food bank moved to its current location, a 16,000 square foot warehouse at 915 Douglas. The effects of a poor economy proved that the food bank was an asset in the St. Joseph community. Food distribution increased to over two million pounds, but the USDA commodities were cut by nearly 70 percent leaving Second Harvest to find food elsewhere. At the same time, Buchanan County, and four other counties served by Second Harvest, saw an increase in unemployment.

In 1996, an important event in food banking nationwide came in the form of legislation. On October 1, 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, which included the following:

- Standardized donor liability in all 50 states when they donate to a non-profit organization;

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- Protects donors from civil and criminal liability should the product donated in good faith later cause harm to the needy recipient; and
- Sets a liability floor of “gross negligence” or intentional misconduct for persons who donate grocery products; and recognizes that the provision of food close to the date of recommended retail sale is, in and of itself, not grounds for finding gross negligence.

A 500 square foot cooler was added to the food bank in 1996, as was a 2,000 square foot freezer. This greatly expanded the food bank’s ability to handle frozen and perishable food items.

Later that year, the food bank was renamed to Second Harvest Food Bank/Mo-Kan Region to strengthen name recognition with the Second Harvest national organization.

In 2006, America’s Second Harvest celebrated its 25th anniversary. During that time, Second Harvest fed more people than ever before by providing more than 2.7 million meals to those in need.

On January 1, 2010, Second Harvest of Greater St. Joseph went through a major re-branding process and became Second Harvest Community Food Bank. The Board of Directors felt a “one community” mentality was needed to better provide for the 19-county service area. Despite the name change, Second Harvest’s vision remained the same.

In 2011, Second Harvest distributed 4.6 million pounds of food to Northwest Missouri and Northeast Kansas. This was the most food Second Harvest had ever distributed in its history.

In September 2011, Second Harvest Community Food Bank celebrated a 30-year milestone of nourishing our neighbors in Northwest Missouri and Northeast Kansas.

In January 2012, we launched an innovative program. Our Close the Gap program was put into place to help enroll eligible individuals in SNAP, formerly food stamps. To help in this process we hired two full time Food Security Coordinators to cover our Missouri counties. This program was founded through a grant. In the first three months the program enrolled 360 people and generated \$1.8 million in economic impact and provided 431,000 meals. Harvesters-The Community Food Network food bank in Kansas City came to learn how we are running a successful program.

Also, in January 2012, we changed our Harvest House hours based on the feedback received by our members. We went from being open two days a week to five days a week. With the increased hours, we saw the number of individuals served increase from 600 a week to nearly 1,500 a week.

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On May 30, we had distributed a total of 572,983 pounds of food. That was our highest monthly distribution in our 30-year history.

In June 2012, we launched our Summer Feeding Program, “No Hunger Summer.” We selected two sites in St. Joseph to serve approximately 40 children. The program also had another component where we provided 230 meal box vouchers to Backpack Buddies families in St. Joseph.

On September 1, the announcement was made for Fresh Start, Your Community Market. Fresh Start would serve as a nonprofit grocery store and food pantry open five days a week. Through this “next generation” food pantry model, community members who have a household income of less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines will have access to fresh, nutritious food at no cost to them through the Fresh Picks program. Fresh Start opened on January 7, 2013.

In February 2013, Second Harvest hit a major milestone in distribution: 1 million pounds of fresh produce was distributed. The first time this has happened in the organization’s history. Also in 2013, Second Harvest distributed 6 million pounds of food, which was the most food Second Harvest has ever distributed in its history.

In the fall of 2016, Second Harvest celebrated its 35-year history. Thanks to generous support from Mosaic Life Care Community Connections, Second Harvest launched its first mobile pantry, called the Fresh Mobile Pantry. The Fresh Mobile Pantry is a food pantry on wheels, filled with nutritious food items, that travels to various locations in rural and under-served areas of Second Harvest’s 19-county service area. Volunteers from the host sites help set up and serve clients. The mobile pantry allows Second Harvest to engage those most in need and extend their service into hard to reach food deserts, offering fresh produce and protein helps provide access to those who have not been served. Some pantries in Second Harvest’s service territory are only able to offer food product to individuals three or four times per year due to lack of food product available and/ or infrastructure to stock needed food to distribute more food on a more regular basis. The mobile pantry currently distributes to nine set locations monthly across the service area. The Fresh Mobile Pantry provides more access to fresh produce and offers more individuals better nutritional choices. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic Second Harvest was up to 80 Mobile distributions a month.

Currently, Second Harvest distributes to 65 partner agencies across the 19-county service area, providing 5.5 million pounds of food in FY2021. Second Harvest has seen great change over the past forty years, but the fight against hunger will continue until the hunger lines no longer exist.