

BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

A partnership of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and America's SBDC Iowa

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 48: Fighting Food Insecurity in Iowa

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Description: *Aubrey Alvarez, Executive Director of Eat Greater Des Moines, and Matt Unger, CEO of the Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC), speak about the work their respective organizations do to combat food insecurity in Iowa, how they have been affected by COVID-19, and suggest ways in which other Iowans can help this winter.*



[music]

Steve Adams, host 00:10

Hello, and welcome to the Back to Business Iowa podcast from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the programs including Community and Economic Development, Farm, Food and Enterprise Development, and the Iowa Small Business Development Centers. These podcasts cover relevant topics for businesses and individuals related to education, research and technical assistance during and post COVID-19.

Steve Adams, host 00:55

I'm Steve Adams, field specialist three at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, part of the Community and Economic Development unit and your host for these podcasts. Well, our guests today are Aubrey Alvarez, Executive Director of Eat Greater Des Moines and Matt Unger, CEO at Des Moines Area Religious Council. Aubrey Matt, thank you both for being with us today.

Aubrey Alvarez 01:22

Thanks for having us.

Matt Unger 01:23

Yeah, thank you.

Steve Adams, host 01:25

Hey, Aubrey, can you tell us about Eat Greater Des Moines? And by the way, that sounds like a bad title for Godzilla script. [laughter] Tell us about Eat Greater Des Moines and when it was started and what it does?

Aubrey Alvarez 01:37

Well, and that's really, so Eat Greater Des Moines initially was a website. So it was started to track all of the school, community and faith-based gardens within the greater Des Moines region. So that's really where Eat Greater Des Moines started was where could you eat all over greater Des Moines? They eventually added some more food rescue, farmers market, CSAs, some of that information on to it. And eventually, you know, it wasn't until a few years later that they decided to hire staff to do it.

Aubrey Alvarez 02:10

So really, it was because at the time, so Matt's predecessor at DMARC was in a lot of conversations with the United Way about food access and, you know, healthy food. And they were having a lot of the

same conversations over and over and recognizing that there were ideas that were being put forward or, you know, things, challenges people were running into. And unfortunately, because there was no entity or person focused on that work, you know, nothing was getting resolved—it was usually an addition to someone's already full plate or a volunteer roles.

Aubrey Alvarez 02:12

So really, that's why they put money towards hiring what at the time they called a local food coordinator in April of 2013. So that's when I came on was April of 2013, as well as my co-founder and counterpart, Linda Gobberdiel. So really our role and what we do is just try to be a connector within and throughout the food system. So we, obviously being a small organization, right now we're a staff of three, we can't do a lot of the direct services ourselves. We're really about identifying, you know, where are things going really well? How can we lift those up and do more? And then where are there gaps? How can we bring the right people together to address those gaps? So we're really, we kind of see ourselves as a matchmaker within the food system that makes it easier for everyone to have access to quality, healthy food, and also be successful.

Steve Adams, host 03:47

Well, that network is obviously very important. And for our listeners that may not know CSA stands for what what does that acronym mean?

Aubrey Alvarez 03:58

Community Supported Agriculture.

Steve Adams, host 04:00

Very good. I knew that, by the way, Aubrey. So when you're talking about local foods, that's kind of interesting. I see that 88%, I should say, of local growers accept food assistance programs, like SNAP. Well, I think that's incredible. But how does Eat Greater Des Moines help facilitate that process and what's it like in practice?

Aubrey Alvarez 04:24

Yeah, so a lot of the growers, local growers we're kind of working with are those that are at farmer's markets, or maybe have a farm stand. So really, what's important, you know, I think we can all recognize that farmers markets are a great way to build community, it's a great way for people to get out, meet your neighbors. And really the goal of having all of our farmers markets accepting the various food assistance programs, really just make sure that the market is inclusive of all customers and that it's an easier, you know, it's really just another way for farmers to get paid.

Aubrey Alvarez 04:59

So unfortunately access at our farmers markets, having multiple vendors that accept SNAP is something that has been a challenge. So really, we've been working to reach out to farmers and farmers market managers to help really just take them through the training. You know, applying to accept SNAP is a bit of a daunting process, you know, with any of those kinds of programs. So we really just try to create the space to help them get the application going, answer questions about, you know, special equipment and what kinds of things do they need to do, so that our goal would be 100% of local growers at farmer's markets are accepting SNAP. And really, that's a win for everybody.

Steve Adams, host 05:48

Well, I've always been extremely interested in the community garden concept. So where are the majority of these gardens located, and how large would a typical garden plot be typically?

Aubrey Alvarez 06:01

Well, you know, that's the fun about our community garden network is you have some that are in buckets, plastic buckets, so that there, we have a group called 9 Square Feet that had done a project where they were putting a few tomato plants in a bucket or potatoes in a bucket and providing them to seniors, or those living in apartments that couldn't have a garden. So we have that small to we have a garden in West Des Moines in the middle of the city that's almost an acre that grows and distributes at least 10,000 pounds of food every year.

Aubrey Alvarez 06:40

So you know, I think what's tricky with the community garden concept is it's not necessarily how it's run, it's really just where the garden is located. Because each of these community gardens are very different. Some of these gardens are a place where it really is shared work. So the community garden, you have neighbors, you know, friends all sharing the work and then sharing the harvest. A lot of the community gardens as well here that are very popular are places where it's in individual plots. So someone who maybe doesn't have a yard or doesn't have enough yard for what they want to do.

Aubrey Alvarez 07:16

I know my counterpart Linda needed more space to grow the vegetables she wanted. So she would rent a community garden plot at one of the library locations. So you know, that's also considered a community garden. And then we also have kind of the final variation we talked about is really the ones that are growing, you know, there's a group that's growing the food, and they just want the neighborhood to come and enjoy it. So that's really where you know, because there's so many varying, you know, how community gardens are being approached.

Aubrey Alvarez 07:52

We've been one of our projects was trying to provide signage to all of these gardens to help them you know, people know that there's a garden there, but knowing am I supposed to eat this, am I not supposed to eat this, you know, helping make that connection. But we have a great network of gardens and I would say, you know, in especially the last year, I think gardening's been on the rise, but just finding more spaces for us to have them has been of interest.

Steve Adams, host 08:23

I see you also do food rescue. And you know, one doesn't really have to look too far to see wasted food in our everyday life. Which kind of seems like a tragedy when we know people in our community are going hungry. How does the Eat Greater Des Moines program work in regards to food rescue?

Aubrey Alvarez 08:43

Well, initially, our role in food rescue was to just educate people. I know when I started this job, I wasn't familiar with food recovery, either. So I have been at events before and just asked, you know, what's happening with this extra food? Are you going to donate it? And have regularly gotten the response, Oh, we can't, you know, health laws. So luckily, one of my first meetings within my role with Eat Greater Des Moines, I got to meet with Table to Table in Iowa City and Central Iowa Shelter and Services—two groups that do a ton of food recovery. And they helped explain the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act that protects donors from civil and criminal liabilities. And that really is kind of what got us kick-started.

Aubrey Alvarez 09:31

So, you know, initially our role was just try to raise awareness and make it simple for those who have food to connect with organizations that can use the food. So unfortunately, you know, I think we've all been in a situation where maybe you have a catered event or a wedding or a graduation or even just an office party, and it's hard to know how much to order. So you know, they'll have an event and there's

food leftover at the end of the event and someone wants to donate it. A lot of times, you know, one of the challenges is just knowing where that food can go.

Aubrey Alvarez 10:02

So for example, if someone has a bunch of you know, they had an Italian meal, they have a bunch of lasagnas, you know, full trays of lasagnas that were prepared but aren't going to be eaten. If they tried to take those to one of the DMARC food pantries, they can't accept that food. You know, they're not providing meals, they're providing the ingredients to make the lasagna. So we wanted to just make it simpler for those who were wanting to do the right thing to find the right partner. So a lot of that has been just matching organizations with a regular partner.

Aubrey Alvarez 10:36

We really kind of increased, um, transportation has always been a barrier in this space. 99% of the organizations that are engaged in food recovery, meaning that they will, you know, donate their excess food, require the nonprofit organization to come pick it up. And that really just leaves a lot of nonprofits and organizations that could use the food out, because they don't have a staff, the volunteer capacity to go and get that food on a regular basis. So we recently, in April 2018, we launched our transportation program, a partnership initially with Wesley Life Meals on Wheels, and then Kum and Go convenience stores.

Aubrey Alvarez 11:20

So we have been paying drivers to pick up any of their fresh prepared sandwiches, salads, wraps, kind of those fresh-case items from Kum and Go after 72 hours. That's their policy, they won't sell anything over 72 hours old, they will put it in their cooler in a tote and we have drivers that come by every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, pick up the totes, leave empty ones and then deliver that food to locations around the community. So I think really what we are trying to do is, one, increase how can we work better together to capture all this excess food?

Aubrey Alvarez 11:57

I think the message that's shared a lot, unfortunately, is we don't have enough food, you know, people are going hungry because we don't have enough food. That is not the case—we have so much food that we throw it away and it hasn't even been consumed. What we really have is an issue with not being able to make all these connections, so that when a food doesn't have a use where it's at, we can move it somewhere where it's needed and do that in an efficient and equitable manner. So that's really where we're trying to focus now, on where else can we put food, looking at community fridges, affordable housing communities, but just trying to capture more of the food that's out there and available, and then put it where people are so they can safely access it.

Steve Adams, host 12:42

Well I love that Kum and Go with a tote program, that sounds really good. And Aubrey, thanks for that. But, Matt, I think we need to switch over to you here. I don't want to leave you out of this conversation. So can you tell us about the Des Moines Area Religious Council? And Aubrey already referred to it as DMARC—who makes up DMARC, and how long has your organization been in existence?

Matt Unger 13:06

Sure. So DMARC is made up of about 200 interfaith partners that come from five different faith tradition backgrounds. We have a nearly 70-year history of meeting human needs in greater Des Moines. Really, these folks came together and decided, hey, collectively, we can have a greater impact and we can do things smarter to try and serve the region as a group.

Matt Unger 13:33

Um, there's been some really cool things that have happened over the history of the organization. In the late 60s. It led to the creation of the Homes of Oak Ridge here in Des Moines, which is some low-income housing that's been really instrumental to keeping folks housed and providing good safe shelter for folks in the 70s. Working with the United Way the groundwork was laid for what would become Hospice of Central Iowa. And then in the 80s, they created a program called Life after Death of a Spouse to help those folks who had been in a long relationship and now are trying to cope going forward without their mate.

Matt Unger 14:16

Um, but really the biggest way that we've carried out our mission since about 1976 is through our food pantry network, which is made up of 14 permanently placed pantries all around the metro, and then another 30 or 31 sites that we serve with two mobile pantry units. And a mobile pantry unit, if you imagine sort of a trailer that would trail a NASCAR, it's that, but it's retrofitted with shelving and refrigerators and a computer inside so we can do some intake and really, just sort of creating a little grocery store on wheels.

Steve Adams, host 14:53

So how many of those mobile food pantries again, Matt, do you have?

Matt Unger 14:57

We have two units that go out and serve as a regular pantry across 30 sites. And then we also have a third unit that we have an exclusive partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of Central Iowa to provide some grab-and-go snacks and some things for those kiddos to take home for their families in their after-school programming too.

Steve Adams, host 15:18

So these mobile food pantries, how do they serve a different clientele I guess, than your permanent locations do? And I guess you kind of alluded to that with the with the food for kids program there. But what else do the mobile pantries actually do?

Matt Unger 15:37

Sure. So we collect a lot of information. We do an intake process at our pantries that asks about 14 questions, find out a little bit of contact information, but also what's going on with folks. What is their income, what is the circumstances that led to them needing a food pantry in the first place, so we can try to get to the root causes. But what we're able to do with some of that data is, we can take it and plot it on a map. So we can see where clients are coming from and which pantries they're traveling to go to, and see if there's any gaps, or we're creating long travel problems for folks. We don't want to create barriers to them receiving the assistance.

Matt Unger 16:20

So when we take that data and put it on a map, we can find where these kind of gap locations are, where we either don't have a food pantry, or a lot of folks are coming from a certain area to go to a different food pantry. And also if there's a food desert, where there's maybe not grocery stores or a way for people to get food in any way in an area, we can kind of look at that data and then we put those mobile pantries in those areas.

Steve Adams, host 16:46

You know, I think that's kind of interesting. I'm glad you brought up the food deserts, because we've been doing quite a bit of research on that as well at Iowa state. And you know, we always think about Iowa being an agricultural state, but there are so many food deserts across Iowa, especially in some of

the rural areas. And you know, it may be that the Casey's store is the only place for people to get food within 30 miles. Are you seeing some of those things as well, Matt?

Matt Unger 17:15

Yeah, there's a little bit of that. You know, the biggest difference, I think, when you're looking at food deserts, between rural and more urban areas is just the plot of land you look at shrinks a little bit. So the distance between stores, it might be a little bit smaller to be considered a desert in an urban area than a rural area. But certainly, there's a lot of places, even in the more urban areas, where a convenience store or gas station like that might be the only source of food that's close to them.

Matt Unger 17:48

And if you're trying to have a healthy lifestyle, it can be tough, you know, you might be able to get an apple or a banana at one of those but you don't have, there's not a produce section. And if there is, those fruits and vegetables tend to be more expensive than they would be in a larger grocery store. You know, the cost for dairy and things like that. So certainly, we try to make sure that we can find those locations, make sure there's access to healthy nutritious foods for those folks. So that, you know, we're not complicating the issues that they're trying to deal with in their daily lives.

Steve Adams, host 18:24

Again, isn't that especially impactful on the elderly? You know, Aubrey was talking about transportation and other things. But sometimes, you know, if you're not participating in a Meals on Wheels type program, your accessibility and able to get to any kind of a food source is difficult, isn't it, Matt?

Matt Unger 18:46

It is. That's absolutely right. And I think we have to have our mobile locations that are actually at senior centers. And one of them's one of our busiest mobile sites. So it's about trying to meet people where they're at, um, make one last stop for them to have to make. And it's been tough during COVID, particularly with a lot of those senior centers being closed right now. We were fortunate to be able to start a pantry delivery program during the pandemic. So a lot of those folks that had maybe been getting to us at those mobile pantries at some of these senior centers still have a way to get that food that they rely and depend upon.

Steve Adams, host 19:32

I'm gonna pivot just a little bit to speak about the effect on what is really the topic of the year, COVID-19. What effect is it had on hunger in Iowa?

Matt Unger 19:43

It's had an incredible impact. We've seen more new clients to our pantry network this year than in really any time and in a breadth that you just don't see. Early on in the pandemic, when we look at those folks that were being assisted, we were seeing upwards of 30% of those clients being brand new, having never been to one of our pantries before. So there's a lot of new folks coming into sort of the food insecurity world.

Matt Unger 20:18

But there's also right now been a magnifying glass on this issue, like there hasn't been before, which has been fantastic, because there's been a lot of government supports out there, there's been a lot of partnerships that Aubrey and I have been able to make with organizations that we maybe had never worked with before. And a whole lot of other organizations that are popping up, you know, with some maybe temporary mobile pantries and other things — just everybody trying to make sure that in our community where we step up when we're in need, that we're doing that and that no one's going without food, and has access to get food.

Matt Unger 21:01

So there's really, there's been more access right now than ever before, which has been really heartwarming to see. But we know we're just at the beginning of this, because following a recession, the last group of people to kind of recover from it is always those at the bottom of the income spectrum, which are by and large the most of who we are assisting.

Steve Adams, host 21:24

Well I noticed here in just something I read in the Cedar Rapids Gazette that Zach Wolf, who's a Senate Minority Leader, said on the first day of the legislature getting back together, which I believe is January 11, that he wants to immediately set up a food assistance program and use money out of the rainy day fund to do that. I know DMARC participates in a lot of advocacy programs as well. Are you in support of what Zach is proposing?

Matt Unger 21:55

Yeah, I mean, I think we need to know the details more of what's possible there. But certainly, we're willing to work with them and talk about what would be helpful from our perspective, and we do that often and frequently. Um, but I think there's a tremendous opportunity in Iowa, we're one of a few states that hasn't made a lot of investment in fighting food insecurity at the state level. So I think there's room for that. Um, I think the governor and lieutenant governor realized that as we started in COVID, and set out a separate task force to look specifically at food insecurity.

Matt Unger 22:35

So I think there should be some broad bipartisan support for doing something more around whether it's increasing what we do with the state food assistance program, SNAP nationally is what it's known by, the old food stamp program. There's adaptations and some things we can do there at the state level to provide some more assistance. There might be some direct ways that there could be funding available to organizations like ours, and food banks and others to help further the work that we're doing. But the fact that they're talking about it and want to do it, I mean, is the first important step. And now it's just making sure that we get that recipe right.

Steve Adams, host 23:18

Understood. So Aubrey, back to you. Have your various programs been affected by COVID-19?

Aubrey Alvarez 23:26

Definitely. I think, you know, one of the main programs that was affected initially was our food recovery program, the one where we're paying drivers. Immediately, we had, a lot of our locations that were receiving food were shut down. So the schools, the community rooms at affordable housing communities had shut down. So we went from 40 locations receiving food to 10 rather quickly. And we also needed to transfer our drivers, because Wesley Life needed all of their drivers.

Aubrey Alvarez 24:00

But it gave us an opportunity to hire individuals who had been furloughed. So there was definitely some transition there, you know, moving to no-contact, masks, extra cleaning. But you know, we also knew at the time—the food was still there, the need was still there. We just had to shift where we were getting it to and you know, kind of be flexible too, as different groups and things start to come back online and we created new partnerships.

Aubrey Alvarez 24:28

I would say one of the biggest impacts, you know, because we are kind of a call when there's extra food—because of all of the closures with restaurants and catering events and you know, hotels not

having events—there were wholesale suppliers that had a lot of really good food available that now had nowhere to go. So they reached out. We worked locally with Loffredo Fresh Produce and Capital City to help them move the product that they had, that they were putting at a discount through all of these different food rescue partners.

Aubrey Alvarez 25:04

So it really was a win because for them, they were able to still make a little profit on the food they had. So they were selling it like a case of apples for \$4, or a case of oranges for \$4, which was is a great deal. So, and then at the same time, we had a lot of these, some of our standard partner organizations, but we also had some new groups like daycares, and refugee and immigrant-serving groups and churches and those who aren't in the food space, but were doing what they could to meet their clients and their families. So they didn't usually provide food, but they were stepping in to just be a support to those that they were working with.

Aubrey Alvarez 25:47

So we started that was what we called Operation Fresh Produce Drop, literally, because they would bring the truckload of fresh produce, drop it lightly in, you know, the parking lot. And then we would have, you know, 20–30 different groups go through to pick up what they had purchased. That then transitioned into what we have now, which is the USDA Farm to Families food box program, which has been an amazing opportunity to get a lot of really high-quality fresh produce, protein and dairy out to the community.

Aubrey Alvarez 26:25

But I will also say, it's been an amazing challenge for organizations like ours that don't have, you know, we're not set up like DMARC or a food bank. We don't have a warehouse, we don't have forklifts, you know, we're not, this isn't what we usually do. But we've really been able to, it's been only through partnerships and collaborations. We were doing this at DMARC's site a few weeks ago, we've been able to accept semi-loads of these boxes, and then work with partners throughout the community to distribute them.

Aubrey Alvarez 27:02

So since April, we've moved over a million pounds of these fresh produce, dairy and protein boxes. And that's going to serve, you know, 2,000 to 40,000 people a week, just depending on which organizations are picking it up, because we have some that come and get five boxes, we have some that come and get 400. But you know, that program is really filling a gap within the system, but there's some challenges that have come up with it as well.

Steve Adams, host 27:36

Yeah, I really appreciate that USDA Farm to Family program. And coincidentally, we've got a pickup in Clarinda, which is just south of where I'm located, coming up on December 18. So I know people are taking advantages of that. Well, we've all seen the news coverage of these incredibly long lines. But I think what I'm hearing from both you, Aubrey, and Matt, is that your services have gone up exponentially as COVID has taken over the state. Is that correct?

Matt Unger 28:08

Yeah, definitely. I mean, there was a little taper off at first. You know, I think, in the pantry network, much like happened at the grocery stores, when COVID got here in March, everybody ran out to their pantry and made sure they could get what they needed for the month right away. I think there was a lot of fear that everything was going to shut down and we weren't going to be able to get things and nobody knew exactly how long that might last. And I think also some of the unknowns around this virus and how it behaved and how it would attack people.

Matt Unger 28:41

So initially, I think everybody kind of hunkered down and we initially saw a dip. But then every month since March, the next month has increased over the prior month by about 8 to 10% for us. And this past November, which is always our busiest month of the year, it went over October's numbers by close to almost 30%. So this is this is a growing issue. And as we get further and further through this pandemic, and the additional assistance that I talked about earlier kind of wanes and goes away, everybody's coming back.

Steve Adams, host 29:24

Aubrey, same thing with you? Are you seeing that what Matt said?

Aubrey Alvarez 29:28

Yeah. I think you know, and this is kind of a different space for us, because again, we don't serve people directly. But I think, you know, something that I know Matt and I talk about all the time is that hunger didn't start with COVID. You know, we had food insecurity and hunger issues prior to COVID. And really all COVID has done is push a lot more people into that space, who you know, through no fault of their own, but having you know, huge industry shutting down. Now you have a lot more people who aren't used to, like, they've never had to go and ask for help. They don't know how to navigate these systems.

Aubrey Alvarez 30:05

And we don't really know, you know, as things are going to start to, you know, come back and what kind of other assistance there is. So I think it's a lot of that, you know, there is higher need. But there's also just such a big sense of unknowing of, you know, even for us with the USDA Farm to Families program, we know this current phase ends at the end of the month. There's supposed to be two more phases, but we don't know anything about them. So you know, that sense of uncertainty is also really, I think, exacerbating some of the challenges that are already, you know, these groups are trying to find resources. And, you know, it gets more difficult just as I think less is known.

Steve Adams, host 30:50

Well, I think everyone that's never visited a food pantry or volunteered at one, you know, there's been a certain stigma that's kind of gone in and around going to ask for food. Are you finding that people now are getting over that stigma and realizing that, hey, we gotta eat, so why not?

Matt Unger 31:12

I think there's some of that. Another key priority for us in our network is really providing a dignified experience. So I think that part of our brand is known in the community of folks who have food assistance needs, um, you know, we let folks choose the items they take. It's not usually a pre-packed box of, you know, come in, if you need assistance, here's what you get, see you later. We talk with folks, we try to have things set up like it's a grocery store, as close to a grocery store environment as we can, allow them to choose the items that they take home. So they're not going home with things that they and their family don't want to eat.

Matt Unger 31:57

So I think part of it is just treating people really well and they see that and then they feel it, and it takes some of that stigma out of it. Um, but then the other thing is, one thing we always talk about with our supporters is, you know, if you're donating food, if you're donating funds, that's fantastic. But we need you to be, we need you to be advocates for us too. And when you hear some of the silly stories about someone who had a food need, and they took their SNAP card, and they bought 10 lobsters, like you've got to stop that kind of stuff in its tracks, it's not happening. So it's the supporters that stick up for those folks who have a little food need to. Um, I think it's not an easy thing to ask for help, so we have to

make sure that for those folks that do need that help, that it's accessible and friendly and available to them in a way that doesn't embarrass them.

Steve Adams, host 32:56

You feel the same way, Aubrey?

Aubrey Alvarez 32:58

Well, and I would say, you know, that's definitely something that we've been talking about. So we have the opportunity to work in Polk, Dallas and Marion Counties. So we have a really—or Warren County, and southern Marion. So we really have a unique opportunity to be able to really work in urban and rural communities. And really, some of the challenges that the rural communities face in rural, you know, trying to get food access is, I know, in my hometown, there's one food pantry. And, you know, I think there's a lot, it's hard to ask for help. There's shame involved, even though there doesn't need to be, but it feels bad.

Aubrey Alvarez 33:38

And so in smaller communities, you know, a lot of times people might not want to go to the pantry where they're going to know someone. You know, they'd rather go a few cities over and be able to go to a different pantry or go to an urban setting and get help there, just because, you know, you don't want to have someone recognize you, or maybe you volunteered there in the past. You know, it's definitely a challenge. And that's part of why, you know, in talking with some of the pantries in these communities, you know, there's also some pantries that will make really tight restrictions on who and when you're able to come. You know, you have to be within the school district or you have to be within the zip code, you know, and all of those were set in place, I'm sure with good intentions.

Aubrey Alvarez 34:20

However, you never know why, you know, someone might be coming to that food pantry because they work in that community and it's open the day they were available. So, you know, we've really been trying to push some of these smaller communities to partner and look at the other pantries throughout the community and find out, you know, who's open when, and if, you know, could you be open to everybody in the community? It breaks my heart to know that someone works up the courage to go to a pantry would be turned away because they're not from the right school district. You know, that's not helping. So I think we, you know, looking at the pantries in our community, and just making sure that the policies and the things they have set in place are going to allow people to feel welcome and safe. And you know, that they feel dignified and supported going there.

Steve Adams, host 35:17

It's interesting that you should bring up that rural or small community atmosphere, you know, knowing your neighbors and all, because I got into a conversation with someone at the Food Bank for the Heartland in Omaha, Nebraska. And they said, you'd be surprised how many people we have visiting from Southwest Iowa who just don't want to be seen at their local food bank. So, and I get it.

Aubrey Alvarez 35:43

Yeah, well, and Matt, I know if you've ever seen it when Matt and they do their data kind of display, you can see it, but you can see people coming from different parts of the state, you know, maybe they were visiting family. But you know, there is a certain sense of when you can have some anonymity, you know, and not have to have all your friends and neighbors, you know, know, unless you've told them and you want them to help. But you know, that's a really difficult part to navigate, and really takes that food pantries to go really kind of above and beyond to look at how they're serving, to make sure that they're treating people kindly.

Steve Adams, host 36:24

Matt, I'd really love to see some of your map work there and some of your data sets, I think that would be very interesting to some of our folks at the university level as well. So you and I might try to get together on that later on. Well, before we wrap all this up, I'd like to offer each of you the opportunity to tell our listeners what they can do to assist your organizations to continue serving people dealing with food insecurity and hunger. Now, I've heard people say, Well, if you can't drop off extra produce or extra food that you may have around the house, the best thing you can do is just donate money. So I'm kind of, what do you all want, what do you all need, and what's the best way for us to help?

Matt Unger 37:11

Yeah, I think, you know, we talked about donating food if you can. If you can't, if you can donate funding, that's fantastic, too. We buy roughly half of the food that we distribute through our pantry network. And so we're buying in large quantities, and we can get a really good discount on food where maybe if you can buy one can of tuna with \$1, we could get four for that same dollar. So we can really stretch your dollar. But volunteering and volunteerism is really important, holding food drives. Food drives allow us to build in variety in what we're able to offer to the clients that come to the pantries, and that's really important too. But it's time, it's food, and it's funding. And it's being an advocate. If you need information, or you want to learn more about it, get in touch with us. Our website is DMARCunited.org and there's all kinds of resources and information and ways to connect with us there.

Steve Adams, host 38:12

Aubrey, what about you?

Aubrey Alvarez 38:15

Yeah, well, just kind of to echo what Matt has said, I feel like for us, because you know, we are looking at that system level, something that we're really hoping—so anyone's welcome to follow Eat Greater Des Moines on our social media channels, or on Facebook or on Instagram and Twitter, we have our EatGreaterDesMoines.org website. And really what we want to be is kind of a sounding board, or we want to empower other communities to do more of what's happening here. We want to empower more communities to feel like, you know, they can have a robust food recovery program, they can be putting food where people are, they could be accepting, you know, like what's happening in Clarinda, with getting those food boxes.

Aubrey Alvarez 39:01

You know, that's really, Eat Greater Des Moines, it will always be, we're small, it will be focused in central Iowa. But that doesn't mean— we want to support other communities that are wanting to do some of these same things. So I consider myself more of just a hype person to help someone like talk through the idea, what is the potential, what are the options, and then empower them to create those changes within their own communities. Because that's really, you know, we're here in central Iowa, we always love, we're having volunteers every Wednesday at the fresh produce drop. But mostly I think the most important is to look where you're at within your community. Where is food, where could food go, and then start making those connections.

Steve Adams, host 39:44

Well, I can't tell you how appreciative I am personally about what you're doing, and I've volunteered at food banks in the past and I've helped out at the local food pantry, so it's gratifying, but it's also some of the saddest things I've ever done in my life, I think. I appreciate the work that you're both doing. And hey, thanks for being our guests here today.

Steve Adams, host 40:07

Okay, well, if you have any questions about this Back to Business Iowa podcast, please feel free to contact me, Steve Adams, at stadams@iastate.edu. And as always, thanks for listening. So if you've enjoyed listening to this podcast or any others that we've recorded, please consider posting a review on Stitcher, Spotify, Castbox, the Podcast app, Apple, Google or whichever platform you find your podcasts. Reviews, ratings and comments all help us to build a better podcast, so to speak. So whether it's a one-star or five-star review, we do value your input and opinion, and thanks for doing that.

Steve Adams, host 40:52

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