

Happy New Year from Feed St. Mary's!

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LEXINGTON PARK, Md. - Feed St. Mary's Food Bank finished 2020 with a bang! Even though 2020 will be remembered as the "Year of the COVID", it will also be known as the year that FSM sprouted wings and soared. Thanks to the work of the staff and the collaboration with various community partners, FSM hit the ground running and made a dent in food insecurity in St. Mary's County.

In this special edition of The Dinner Bell, Dr. Linda Lymas recounts the agency's birth and development. We are grateful to everyone who helped provide a solid foundation for Feed St. Mary's and look forward to the hope and growth in 2021.

Our Journey, Our Thanks!

By Dr. Linda Lymas, Feed St. Mary's Founder and Volunteer Board Chair

The year 2020, was a year of monumental changes and unprecedented need, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the midst of adversity and a regrettable situation, St. Mary's County witnessed the opening of its first-ever Food Bank, Feed St. Mary's (FSM), Inc. The Feed St. Mary's journey bears a striking resemblance to the founding of the first food bank established in the world. Approximately fifty-three years ago, John Arnold van Hengel, a grassroots activist, entrepreneur and the Father of Food Banking, founded the world's first food bank in 1967. It is ironic that this first food bank, located in Phoenix, Arizona was named St. Mary's Food Bank (www.firstfoodbank.org). The St. Mary's Food Bank is still open for business and, needless to say, still thriving. Similarly, only ten months since the first food drop, Feed St. Mary's, St. Mary's County's first food bank, is making astoundingly positive progress.

This article highlights the small and large triumphs of our FSM journey to establish a food bank here in St. Mary's County. In many ways, our challenges and accomplishments are similar to those that the Father of Food Banking faced, and the similarities are also shared. For example, Van Hengel's motivation to establish a food bank stemmed from his dissatisfaction with the limited efficiency to eradicate hunger, the affluence in the world and the insurmountable waste of edible food items by the food industry and grocery stores. St. Mary's County pantry leaders and community food stakeholders shared similar concerns. Their concerns included, but were not limited to, being able to maintain a sufficient quantity of nutritious and healthy food choices, such as protein, fresh vegetables and fruits, the poor quality of food available to pantries, refrigeration, and freezer issues to store the food and lack of consistent volunteers. Consequently, in 2017, the Rotary Club of Lexington Park began to look for longterm solutions to the increasing food insecurity problem and ways to support our local pantries and soup kitchens in a more efficient manner. The decision to focus on food insecurity was also based, in part, on information from available data sources, such as, the County Gap Analysis, Rotary's Leadership Southern Maryland Project, St. Mary's county Public Schools, Department of Social Services and St. Mary's County Government. The data seemed to suggest that 36% of St. Mary's County residents fit the description of residents who are unable to afford basic necessities with food being one of the basic necessities.

In February 2018, at the St. Inies Coffee Shop in Great Mills, the Rotary Club of Lexington Park hosted the first information sharing session with pantry and soup kitchen leaders, community food stakeholders and faith leaders. This meeting began a dialog to look for ways to work together to find solutions to ending hunger in St. Mary's County. The dialog continues today. It was at this coffee shop meeting that all attendees, faith leaders, Rotary members, and community food stakeholders, agreed that we, St. Mary's County residents, needed our own food bank, thus planting the seed to stand up a food bank in St. Mary's County. From this meeting, a Steering Committee was formed to assess the feasibility of establishing a food bank in St. Mary's. Three community meetings would follow to hear from residents in different areas of the county. The need for our "own" food bank was voiced at each community meeting.

And moreover, the Rotary Club of Lexington donated \$50,000 as a down payment to initiate the plans for a food bank in St. Mary's County.

In comparison, John van Hengel left the St. Mary's Food Bank in 1976. With a \$50,000 grant from the federal government, he started the Second Harvest Food Bank to assist local food initiatives and facilitate the work of other food banks. The name Second Harvest was later changed to Feeding America, the largest hunger relief organization in the nation and the second largest charitable organization in the United States. In January 2020, Feed St. Mary's forged a partnership with the Maryland Food Bank, a Feeding America partner, to ensure that FSM's hub and spoke distribution center and network partners would have a reliable supply of food for distribution to St. Mary's County food insecure residents. Also, notable, van Hengel's food banks did not distribute food directly to the hungry but worked through a network of decentralized distribution centers such as pantries. This model mirrors FSM's hub and spoke operation. After months of searching for an affordable location, FSM witnessed another huge triumph. U-Haul stepped up and made an offer that far exceeded what we could have ever imagined. On August 1, 2019, Feed St. Mary's signed a 5-year rent-free lease with U-Haul for a 3000 sq. ft. parcel, the first home of Feed St. Mary's, located at 46070 Signature Lane, in Great Mills, Maryland

FSM's good and encouraging news continues, and our team celebrates every triumph. Feed St. Mary's has distributed over 70,000 lbs. of food to pantries and community feeding organizations. On Saturday, November 21, 2020, St. Mary's Food bank in Phoenix hosted their 14th annual Super Saturday Turkey drive with a 10,000 turkey and holiday meal give away to community residents. On Saturday, November 21, 2020, Feed St. Mary's, with only nine months in operation, hosted its first 900 turkey and holiday meal give away to food insecure families in St. Mary's County, Maryland. Thanks to the 15 community organizations assisting with this event, this act of kindness and caring is a testament of our community's unflinching courage and determination to build a brighter food secure future for St. Mary's County citizens.

FSM continues to receive very generous donations and volunteer support from St. Mary's Countians. However, the FSM Team understands there will be challenges on our journey to build FSM. Always, we remain determined to forge ahead. Not knowing that the first wave of COVID-19 would strike in the spring, we were planning for a grand opening on Friday, March 20, 2020. The grand opening, referred to as a first drop celebration, was postponed. The FSM Team was determined to press on. So, on March 20th the first delivery truck carrying 6000 lbs. of food made a drop at the Feed St. Mary's warehouse. Thanks to our three pilot pantries who have for many years demonstrated their commitment to feeding the hungry, the first of the Works of Mercy. Thanks to these leaders for partnering with Feed St. Mary's! Still, FSM looks forward to a grand opening in spring 2021.

Additionally, Feed St. Mary's looks forward to welcoming four new pantries, including one new start-up pantry, to the Feed St. Mary's/Maryland Food Bank Partnership in St. Mary's County. Recently, FSM was fortunate to be the recipient of a very generous grant. As a small token of our appreciation to local pantries and feeding organizations for their exceptional work and commitment to provide food to our food-insecure residents, FSM awarded eighteen grant awards in the amount of \$1000 to network partners, non-network partners, and feeding organizations in St. Mary's County. This award made it possible for the organizations to make food purchases and other items to support their organization. The FSM Team appreciates the work that community food stakeholders do and the sacrifices they make to provide food for the hungry. They are the best in the business!

Of course, there is no way that one charitable organization can solve the food problem alone. By providing food today to those who are hungry, we can work together and only hope for food security tomorrow. This way, our Vision of a St. Mary's County free from hunger will be fully realized. The Feed St. Mary's Team extends "thanks" to the St. Mary's Community, our community food stakeholders, our generous donors, advocates, and volunteers for helping to build and sustain Feed St. Mary's Food Bank, our first-ever food bank in St. Mary's County. We appreciate your remarkable capacity for kindness, your tireless effort and financial support to put food on peoples' tables. Thank you for being part of the journey!

Together, we will feed St. Mary's. Until hunger ends in St. Mary's, our journey continues.

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