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Farmers to Families Food Box Program stabilizes farms, distributors and food insecure in southwestern Pennsylvania

Estimated two million pounds of produce to be delivered over next six weeks

Pittsburgh, PA (May 18, 2020) – Restaurant, hotel and other food service entity closures over recent months have decimated the business of many farms and distributors both nationally and in southwestern Pennsylvania. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) new Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), better known as the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, is providing much needed relief not only to these businesses, but to those facing food insecurity in the form of an estimated two million pounds of produce over the next six weeks, and a projected nearly nine million pounds of high-quality fresh produce now through November.

Utilizing funding and authorities provided in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and other USDA existing authorities, the Farmers to Families Food Box Program is putting these businesses back into action by providing funding to U.S. distributors to assemble fresh fruit and vegetable boxes, approximately 21 – 24 lbs in weight, with product grown by local U.S. farms.

Locally, Paragon Foods, a distributor based in Warrendale, received the largest government contract to execute the program for fresh fruits and vegetables in southwestern Pennsylvania over the next six weeks. This means more to the organization than just new business – it means that Paragon can restore some staffing to pre-pandemic levels and bring on several new positions during the crisis.

“We are excited to partner with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank in helping to bring high quality fresh fruits and vegetables to those in need throughout Western Pennsylvania during this crisis,” said Edd Dwyer, director of food safety for Paragon Foods. “We have always supported their wonderful mission with regular food donations; the Farmers to Families program will allow us to go beyond that and connect our local growers directly to the communities that need them most.”

The recent dramatic drop in demand in the food supply chain has meant that many farms have highly perishable product ready to go to market without a buyer. The Farmers to Families Food Box Program is creating opportunity for these products, thereby stabilizing local area farms, and in many cases, the communities that surround them.

“Our goal has always been to offer our local community fresh, high-quality vegetables,” said Kegan Wright, manager of Pine Valley Farms. “We are grateful to be partnered with Paragon Foods for this program in these uncertain times to ensure that our vegetables won’t be left in the field and the produce we grow will go to people who lost their jobs and are suffering the most from this pandemic.”

As a result of this program, the Food Bank and its network will receive some of the freshest, high-quality produce that it has possibly ever seen. Traditionally, food banks receive produce that doesn’t make it to market because of slight imperfections, it is nearing the end of its useful life on a retailers shelf or overproduction in a farmer’s field. These sourcing techniques generally mean that product arrives at a food bank in bulk bins or in mixed boxes – both of which require volunteers to sort and prepare for distribution – an activity that is currently impossible due to social distancing guidelines.

“Our focus at the Food Bank is to provide the families we serve with the freshest, healthiest foods possible. Last year, 35 percent of the total food we distributed was produce. Since the COVID-19 crisis hit our region, getting fresh produce to the families we serve has been a challenge because of the ways our operations have been forced to adapt to current health and safety guidelines,” said Lisa Scales, president and CEO at the Food Bank. “We couldn’t be more thrilled that the Farmers to Families Food Box Program is creating opportunity and providing stability to our region in so many ways.”

The fresh produce boxes will be distributed in a variety of ways including through the organization’s network of food pantries, drive-up distributions and emergency food distributions at its warehouse. The first deliveries of this product is expected to occur at the Food Bank’s drive-up distributions taking place this week in Butler County, and at Pittsburgh International Airport and PPG Paints Arena. Details for these events are as follows:

Tuesday, May 19
11 a.m. – 1 p.m.
Big Butler Fairgrounds

Wednesday, May 20
Noon - 2 p.m.
Pittsburgh International Airport

Friday, May 22
10 a.m. - noon
PPG Paints Arena

In these uncertain times, the Food Bank is committed to continuing its nearly 40-year mission of feeding people in need and mobilizing the community to eliminate hunger. The organization is continuously monitoring this ever-changing situation and evaluating the best way to provide assistance to individuals and families in need of food assistance.

A full schedule of upcoming distributions; information on volunteer opportunities; and a comprehensive list and map of what schools and community organizations are doing to feed children while schools are closed are available on the Food Bank's website at pittsburghfoodbank.org/covid19.

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About Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank

Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank is a nonprofit organization that distributes more than 35.5 million meals annually across 11 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania through a network of 365 agencies, partners and programs. The Food Bank was founded in 1980 and is a member of Feeding America, the leading domestic hunger-relief charity in the U.S. For more information on hunger in our region or how to get involved, visit pittsburghfoodbank.org.

About Paragon Foods

Founded in 1962, Paragon Foods is the leading supplier of fresh fruits and vegetables in the Greater Pittsburgh Area, along with fresh poultry, dairy, and other specialty items. With an unparalleled commitment to food safety, our focus is on providing the freshest and highest quality ingredients to restaurants, schools, and hospitals throughout the region each and every day. Located in Warrendale, PA, our state-of-the-art, SQF Level 2 certified processing and distribution facility is one of a kind in Pittsburgh. For more information, visit www.paragonfresh.com.