

AFAC Has Served 2 Million Families

PHOTOS BY SHIRLEY RUHE

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This week Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) commemorated serving two million families since they began in 1988. Charles Meng, CEO of AFAC says, “When I came 16 years ago we had four staff members and three distribution sites.”

Now AFAC has 24 employees and 15 sites. Meng says they added sites gradually through the years as they could. “It always takes more people and takes more funds to add a site. For instance, right now we need a night driver and another warehouse guy.

“We didn’t have the variety of food to offer in the beginning, just chicken for protein and nothing leafy, turnips all winter long. It was like Russia or something.

“Now,” he says, “we have much higher quality produce and a selection of chicken, hamburger, hot dogs or fish for protein. And families can choose from a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables as well as eggs, bread, milk and canned goods. We have always had a lot of volunteers but currently we have grown to 2,400 volunteers who bag food, glean, distribute, grow and clean the warehouse as well as help at special events.”

Meng points to a corner of the warehouse stacked with containers and extra stuff. “That’s where my office was when I first got here.” He points to another spot a few feet away which was his next office. “The roof leaked right over my head,” he remembers. But now he has an upstairs office complete with a large window and a cat who considers this his second home.

Meng says it took 23 years for AFAC to serve its first 500,000 families. It then took just 5 years to serve the next 500,000 families and another five years to serve the next 500,000 families. But he says it has taken only three years to serve the remaining 500,000 families which results in the total of two million clients served today. Meng says, “We had 300 families at this location just last week. The total families served at all locations has now risen to over 3,800 per week.

Meng says when he arrived in 2008 they served 40,189 families in a year and in the current year will serve an estimated 180,000 families for an increase of 447 percent.

County Board member Matt de Ferranti arrives to walk through the warehouse with Meng and express his support for AFAC’s efforts. “I need to get back here and help out again,” de Ferranti says. De Ferranti adds, “Hunger may have a strength that appeals to people in a way other things don’t. I’d like to take a look at what we have done historically and understand what we have provided. The County has a Food Security Plan and has funded a number of grants to assist in this effort. They just published a food resources guide. I’m thinking about what should be next. I’m open to what things should be, whatever you guys think.”

Meng predicts the number of families will continue to increase but at some point he thinks it will level off. He says the County provides \$707,606 of the \$10 million annual AFAC budget. “This is 8 percent of what it costs; we raise the other 92 percent ourselves.” He says, “We did get an increase of \$144,784 from the County this year to bring next

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AFAC CEO Charles Meng and County Board Member Matt de Ferranti commemorate two million families served since AFAC began.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY ALANA RAFIEE

Village Sweets provides cookies for the June 4 event as part of the AFAC collaboration with local businesses in the community.

“It takes more people and takes more funds.”

— Charles Meng, CEO of AFAC

year’s County budget for AFAC to \$852,390.

De Ferranti adds that the County has a set of finite resources to satisfy all of the County’s needs. “I think the threat of eviction can have a huge impact on hunger. We did so much on eviction prevention during Covid but now the financial assistance has dried up and people are still being evicted. And we have some structural things we need to do in housing.”

The warehouse is a busy place. Randy stands at a table sorting through produce. A tall cart passes by stacked high with onions. A volunteer is swishing a big mop over the floor. Sam Kirzner walks through the warehouse door heading for his regular Wednesday volunteer work. His wife Debbie is just ending her shift. “AFAC is my favorite Arlington charity. They do an awesome job,” Kirzner says.



Jolie Smith, AFAC development director, shows County Board member Matt de Ferranti the list of AFAC’s current 15 distribution sites.



Charles Meng shows his early office at AFAC where water dripped on his head from a leak in the ceiling.