

End of Hunger Month

But not the end of Hunger in Arlington.

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

It is the end of Hunger Month but not the end of hunger or of Arlington Food Assistance (AFAC) events highlighting the need for food assistance. Robin Ngo and Lus Sawicki, both first time AFAC volunteers, stand beside AFAC boxes located outside the David M. Brown Planetarium on Saturday morning, Sept. 30 for a “stuff the school bus” event.

It is two hours into the event and the school bus remains empty. Ngo says no one has shown up yet. She says, “I think these events do better when they are located right outside the Giant like the ones earlier this month so people can just

easily drop off a few things.”

But AFAC has been active and successful all month bringing attention to the need to mobilize the public to take action on the issue of hunger including its library exhibits in five Arlington branches. In addition, there has been the volunteer opportunity to glean produce at JK Community Farm in Purcellville. Fashion Center at Pentagon City held a CANstruction canned-creation build by local DMV architectural firms with the cans of food donated to AFAC.

In addition, pets get hungry, and AFAC paired with the Animal Welfare League at Lubber Run Farmer’s Market to expand the food drive to include food for pets owned by families in need. And the Annual Golf Tournament at Army Navy Country Club, the big fundraiser of the year, was held Sept. 16.

The Hunger Museum created by MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger offered a virtual tour to educate on the last 100 years of

hunger policy in the United States.

The need is great. Charlie Meng, CEO of AFAC, points out even though Arlington has one of the highest median household incomes in the country, hunger affects vulnerable populations within the county borders. He says, “We are now serving 3,450 families each week and last year we saw a 30 percent increase.” Meng was also bracing for the might-have-been shutdown that could have come on Monday, but now has been averted until at least November.

The opportunity to contribute goes well beyond Hunger Month with AFAC food boxes located in most libraries, various businesses, county offices including the Parks Dept. and the County Building and soon in apartment building lobbies, and volunteer opportunities exist to organize your own food drive.

There are many ways to donate, including donating financially online at <https://afac.org/>



PHOTO BY SHIRLEY RUHE/THE CONNECTION

Lus Sawicki and Robin Ngo stand outside a school bus at an Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) “stuff the bus” event Saturday, Sept. 30.

Now You See It—Now You Don’t

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Charlie Gaylord raised \$470 for the plexiglas, plywood, nails and screws needed to build his vision of a Little Free Pantry in November 2020. Gaylord said he had seen a similar concept in Tennessee at a farmer’s market and wanted to try it in Arlington for his Eagle Scout project. It took Gaylord and several other scouts in Troop 106 six hours to construct the project but about 50 hours of planning.

His project hit smack in the middle of the pandemic which was just the right time to meet the need but made the details of the approval process and the completion of the project more difficult. The original intent of the pantry was to serve as a collection point for nonperishable contributions and to donate them to the Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC). But over time the pantry has gone further than expected and come to serve its own unique population of homeless and food insecure individuals in Arlington and no longer has a connection with AFAC.

Since it was installed the pantry has been sitting right outside the back of the library next to the “Plot for Hunger” garden lining the sidewalk and growing produce for the

Arlington Food Assistance Center. Regulars to the pantry come and go, checking the shelves for the cans of beans and corn, boxes of cereal, cooking oil, bags of rice and occasional chocolate bar.

Over time the winter months have taken their toll as the doors of the pantry have been buffeted by wind, and the deadbolts holding the doors have been warped by the cold, necessitating some minor repairs. But the pantry always seemed to get back in operation.

Now on Sept. 27 during Hunger Month (and banned book week) a notice from the library appeared on the front door of the pantry announcing the pantry would be taken down Friday, Sept. 30. The notice was a surprise and gave no reason. Reactions ranged from anger to disappointment to curiosity.

The notice listed alternate sites where free food would be available and indicated there is an AFAC food collection box inside the library for those library patrons who wish to continue donating food.

The notice said, “If you are hungry there are many places in Arlington to help. To name a few: St. George’s Episcopal Church on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 12-1 pm, AFAC with varying hours Monday- Saturday and Mt.

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Charlie Gaylord built a Little Free Pantry for his Eagle Scout project in the midst of the pandemic in November 2020 and installed it outside the Central Library with their permission.



The Library unexpectedly removed the Little Free Pantry on Sept. 30, 2023, leaving only the wooden stubs remaining. They had posted a sign a few days before indicating their intention.