

Mobile Pantries Serve as the Answer to Food Bank's COVID-19 Limitations

Hayley Croke



When COVID-19 hit, food pantries were presented with the challenge of needing to pivot their operations in a way that would still allow them to serve their communities. The solution came in the form of mobile pantries.

Mobile pantries function as a drive through food pantry. At a mobile pantry, community members drive up to the pantry location, fill out an information form and open up their trunk for volunteers to place pre-portioned boxes of food in their car.

Why It's Newsworthy: In the state of Georgia 1,279,310 people face hunger and food pantries act as a reliable resource for food insecure communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic these food

banks had to pivot their structure in order to still provide food resources for those who continue to struggle as well as those whose struggles have worsened because of the pandemic.

These mobile pantries have become [The Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia](#)'s second-largest program. Over the past year the program has distributed 5,854,396 pounds of food which equates to roughly [4,878,663 meals](#).



The Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia distributes pre portioned, 50 pound boxes of food to mobile pantries around northeast Georgia. Volunteers load the boxes into the trunks of community members who come to each mobile pantry to allow for a completely contactless interaction. Photo/Hayley Croke

The Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia sends trucks full of boxes that hold 50 pounds of assorted food options to partnering mobile pantry locations. While this program provides a solution to the COVID-19 restrictions food banks have faced, local food banks have found this system to be highly effective in surprising ways.

Serving Northeast Georgia

Martin Baptist Church of Martin, Georgia has been partnered with the Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia since 2013. On November 2, the church held one of their mobile pantries. The truck sent from the Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia filled with the food boxes was set to arrive at noon for the mobile pantry to begin at 2 p.m., but by 12:15 p.m. the line for the pantry was already 6 cars long.



On November 2, the Martin Baptist Church held a mobile pantry starting at 2 p.m. but by 12:15 p.m. a line had already formed. The church has partnered with the Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia since 2013 and has transitioned into holding only mobile food pantries.

Photo/Hayley Croke

“They start coming early and they just sit out there for hours until we start the line,” Ruth Pless, the organizer of the Martin Baptist Church food bank, said.

The truck from the Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia comes from Rabun County and arrived closer to 1 p.m. and by then the line was 12 cars deep. People sat in their cars reading the newspaper, listening to the radio and speaking with one another.

Pless said in the past month the Martin Baptist Church's food pantry has been able to feed 181 families.

“They start to line up in the church parking lot and they go past the cemeteries. We've had them from the church, out of sight past both cemeteries where you can't even see the cars,” Pless explained.

UGA Participates

The Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia operates out of Athens and Clayton County, with partnerships throughout northeast Georgia, all which have transitioned to operating mainly as mobile pantries. One of their local partners is the University of Georgia's student run organization [Food2Kids](#).

Anna Cook, the Director of Community Outreach for UGA Food2Kids, said the impact of these mobile pantries has been huge within the Athens community.

“It's been really successful. I think they can access more people, which is why their numbers did increase originally. You just drive there and leave and you might be there an hour if you were the first person in line and got delayed a little bit. I think it's just more accessible,” Cook said.



Due to the pandemic, UGA Food2Kids transitioned their operations to holding only mobile pantries. On average each mobile pantry will serve 175 cars, each car picking up pre-portioned food boxes for one to two families.

Photo/Hayley Croke

On average the organization plans for around 175 cars to come through the mobile pantry. These cars, however, could be community members getting supplies for two households. On busier days the number is closer to 200, 225 cars that come through.

“Last fall, we would do about 250 or like 300 cars, and usually they picked up for more than one family,” Cook said about some of the higher numbers of community members the organization has fed.



At the Martin Baptist Church, prior to the start of the mobile drive, the volunteers help make extra boxes in case they need more supplies for community members. The church utilizes volunteers from the Victory House, a faith-based drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, to assist in the mobile pantry's distributions.

Photo/Hayley Croke

At each of the mobile pantries run in partnership with the Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia, the organization provides the food packages, delivery drivers and refrigeration for the hosting pantries. This negates the need for pantry locations to provide storage space for the delivered supplies as they go right out to the recipients.

Since the pandemic began, The Food Bank of NorthEast Georgia has increased from 25 to 27 mobile pantries a month to 32-33. This combines for a total of 393 mobile pantries over the last year.

These pantries still rely on local volunteers to assist with distribution. The mobile format, however, has allowed for operations to continue amid the ongoing pandemic.

Hayley Croke is a senior majoring in journalism and minoring in film studies in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.