

NABOR®

HELPS

**PROVIDING HOPE, HELPING HANDS
AND A LOT OF HEART**

Naples Area Board of
REALTORS® launches
NABOR® Helps community
assistance program.

BY TESS RAINES



It's no secret that 2020 didn't exactly unfold the way we imagined. Restaurants, retail stores, parks and beaches closed, marking an abrupt end to a bustling season and putting many members of the community in a precarious situation. Business at the Naples Area Board of REALTORS® changed, too. Annual events like the Economic Summit, St. Patrick's Day Parade and Leadership Academy 2020 were canceled or postponed, leaving every department to take on extra tasks to ensure that the members wouldn't have to shuffle more than the hand they'd already been dealt. In planning how to manage the uncertainty ahead, members of the NABOR® board of directors developed the NABOR® Helps program, designed to push past the obstacles

presented by COVID-19 and provide meals and essential products to the Collier County community.

"It started with a past president calling me and he said, 'I think we need to talk about this COVID,'" says NABOR® President Lauren Melo. "I called a number of past presidents in and sat down with them over a boxed lunch. I don't think that day any of us had any idea how catastrophic it would be."

Melo met with NABOR® Vice President/Secretary Adam Vellano and Director Leah Paige early in April to discuss what NABOR® could do to help the community. Earlier that week, NBC-2 News applauded Paige for her work in partnering with Sophia's Ristorante Italiano to deliver three-course meals, donated by the restaurant, to three local fire stations. The impact of COVID-19 hit close to home

for Paige, whose husband is a battalion chief for North Collier Fire Control and Rescue District. For him, staying home wasn't an option, so Paige began dropping off meals to show her appreciation for the first responders' fortitude. These early efforts would soon grow into a full-fledged community assistance program that would not only donate food, but also purchase school supplies and other essential products, like hand sanitizer, for groups that struggled to obtain them.

The NABOR® leadership team decided to build on Paige's efforts and launched the first phase of the NABOR® Helps program. To continue providing meals for front-line workers, the NABOR® Helps task force created a donation page online for NABOR® members who wished to contribute. Melo also opted to repurpose the funds from March and April's canceled events to the

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cause. The money raised would be used as credit toward a takeout meal for any first responders and front-line healthcare workers who placed an order worth up to \$20. Plus many members donated funds in support of the program.

Beside Sophia's, the NABOR® Helps program recruited four additional restaurants to participate, including Noodles Italian Cafe and Sushi Bar, Larry's Lunchbox, Boston Beer Garden and Rusty's Raw Bar & Grill, all of which were "geographically convenient not only to the hospitals, but EMS and police," Paige explains.

The effort was two-fold: Those on the front lines of the pandemic received meals, while the restaurants brought in much-needed financial support during the statewide safer-at-home order.

The NABOR® community jumped into the cause and ultimately accumulated more

than \$12,000 to provide 600 meals to front-line workers in Naples. Media coverage put a spotlight on the program, and the meal credits were cashed in immediately by first responders and medical professionals. "It wasn't even 48 hours," says Melo. "We saw such huge success, and people were emailing and responding, saying, 'We are so thankful, you guys are amazing.' With that was just this a-ha moment."

The influx of positive responses prompted the team to develop the next phase of the program, though it didn't take them long to determine what that would be.

"We had some feedback from first responders who said, 'Listen, we appreciate everything you've done. But we get a paycheck. We would love for you to give to those without a paycheck,'" Melo recalls.

At this point, Florida was approaching the fourth week of lockdown, and Melo was

taking note of all the local farmers who were dumping their crops for lack of demand.

"I know we have people who need food," says Melo. "St. Matthew's House—the line was out the door, around the building and down Airport Road."

To meet the needs of those who were hungry and without a paycheck, and to curb the high quantity of crops being wasted, Melo reached out to U.S. Sugar and inquired about a donation of extra food. She received a call back and was told to expect 500 crates of fresh corn packed by Duda Fresh Farms in 36 hours.

Being out of town, she immediately got in touch with Lauren Bonica, Collier County's emergency management human services program manager, to discuss the delivery and distribution of the corn. Bonica alerted several organizations in the county to call Melo for a share.





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Melo laughs as she recalls the feedback. “Twenty-four hours of nonstop (phone calls),” she says. But those calls paid off—at 8 p.m. the night before the delivery, all the corn was spoken for. “All of it. Every bit of it,” says Melo.

Benison Center, a donation distribution warehouse, Meals of Hope, a Naples foodbank, and St. Matthew’s House, which helps homeless families, each received a third of the 10-pallet delivery. They then distributed the corn to residents through the organizations’ respective pantry programs.

Vann Ellison, the president and CEO of St. Matthew’s House, says that the

organization typically serves 30 to 70 families during any given week, but since the coronavirus hit, that number shot up to nearly 2,000 families. The corn delivery helped assuage the sudden spike in needed meals.

Although St. Matthew’s House gladly welcomed the corn, Ellison believes there is something to be said about the effort behind the delivery. “This is about the community coming together and meeting the need with more resources than we could have ever had,” he says. He adds that the families in need being served by the organization are amazed by the collective generosity.

It’s a clear and eye-opening reminder that they’re not isolated in their hardship; the community cares, says Ellison.

It was in that same spirit of solidarity that NABOR® dubbed the effort the Farm to Neighbor program. In May, a second shipment of 300 crates of corn was delivered to Meals of Hope’s distribution center in Naples. This time, the Florida-based food distributor, Cheney Brothers, joined the cause and shipped the corn from Duda Fresh Farms to Southwest Florida. And a week later, Melo drove out to Everglades City in her personal truck to unload more corn for the Everglades City Food Bank.



NABOR®'s Adam Vellano, Vice President/Secretary; Leah Paige, Director; Lauren Melo, President; and Paula Angelopoulos Urbinati, Director

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Although the last few months have been unpredictable, one thing is certain—this definitely isn't the end of the NABOR® Helps program. If anything, it's only just getting started.

Just two weeks after U.S. Sugar donated the first batch of corn, Frank Rincon, the founder of Benison Center in Immokalee, reached out to Melo with a dilemma. The center receives truckloads of donated products weekly from partners like Costco and World Vision. Many times, the products are consumables, which Benison Center then sends off to local agencies for distribution in the community.

Recent truckloads to the center have included bicycles and office chairs from a national retail corporation. However, both of these products are legally barred against distribution within the country after they're donated. After attempts to move the bikes and chairs to Panama and Mexico fell through, Rincon realized that his new connection with NABOR® could change the equation.

Within the week, Melo had given Rincon a thumbs up: NABOR® agreed to absorb the transportation fee for taking the bikes

and chairs over to the east coast, as well as the cost for shipping the goods to the Bahamas, which was ravaged by Hurricane Dorian last year.

Rincon, who is also the English ministries pastor at Bethel Assembly of God church in Immokalee, estimates that there are about two-and-a-half trailer loads of bikes and chairs sitting at Benison Center. "These products are taking up so much space in the warehouse, and the Bahamas is going to be an amazing place where I think we're going to make a huge impact," he says.

Because COVID-19 required all classroom curriculum, including public schools and nonprofit programming, to switch to a virtual platform, many students found themselves lacking essential supplies. NABOR Helps®, with assistance from OfficeMax, was able to purchase a total of \$700 in school supplies to donate to Benison Center, which would be passed along to the Immokalee Foundation for distribution.

Paige is encouraged by the outpouring of thanks from the community, as well as the needs NABOR® has been able to meet. She, too, is confident in the board's ability to effect positive change.



“We’re very committed to doing things for the community. It’s not just about home ownership,” she says.

“It’s the community taking care of each other, knowing that we live and work in the same community,” says Paige. “We’re members who are equally as impacted. It’s about standing up and doing the right thing.”

In addition to the NABOR® Helps

program, the board has participated in other projects designed to enhance the community.

An association of REALTORS® may seem like an unlikely partner for a food distribution project, but it’s as much a community-support effort as it is a personal one. And that’s exactly the point NABOR® wants to drive home.

This idea resonates deeply with Melo,

who found that many people have the mistaken impression of REALTORS®. “I always ran into people who felt that REALTORS® only care about financial success. As a REALTOR® and president, I wanted to change that,” she explains.

“Our board is very community-centric,” Melo adds. “We’re going to continue coming up with ideas for how to get further involved.” **NR**

