THE COMMON MARKET

LEAFY GREENS
The Common Market provided emergency food aid to people in need — like this box delivered by Children's Hospital of Philadelphia — for the first time during the pandemic. Before, it bought fresh produce from farmers, which it then sold to institutions such as schools.

The Pandemic Reveals the Importance of Advocacy to a Food Charity

By NICOLE WALLACE

For the last 13 years, the Common Market's mission has been to get healthy food to people who have limited access to produce. It did that by purchasing produce from local farms that use sustainable practices and selling it to schools, hospitals, and universities, first from its home base of Philadelphia and later from Atlanta and Houston.

The pandemic upended the food landscape with lightning speed.

"Most of the institutions that we work with more or less shut down," says Haile Johnston, chief development officer and one of the group's co-founders. "We were very unsure about what the future was going to hold, but we decided that this was the moment when people needed access to good food more than ever."

The nonprofit overhauled its operation to focus on emergency food aid. In the past, roughly three-quarters of the group's $9 million budget was earned income from the sale of food. During the pandemic, it won contracts from cities like New York and Atlanta. Then it won two contracts from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farmers to Families program to provide boxes of produce to people in the mid-Atlantic and the Southeast. It was a wild ride. At the height of its emergency food work, the Common Market was distributing 10 times its usual volume of produce. The experience — by turns exhausting and exhilarating — opened leaders' eyes to the importance of advocacy and policy work to bring about the changes in local food systems.

"The pandemic was a wake-up call for everyone," Johnston says.

'They Fought'

The organization didn't know what to expect when it started providing produce to people in need. The group's first contract was with the city of New York, and it started during that city's terrifying Covid outbreak in the spring of 2020.

"We were sending five trucks a day full of these boxes," says Tatiana Garcia Granados, chief operations officer and another of the Common Market's three co-founders. "The National Guard would meet our trucks and then put the boxes into taxis, and that's how it would get to the people who had requested the food."

Putting together boxes of produce for individuals and families was very different from distributing food to large commercial kitchens. No more 40-pound bags of sweet potatoes. The organization had to set up assembly lines, which required a lot more labor. Its staff swelled from 30 people pre-pandemic to more than 150 at the height of the emergency food operation. Most of those were temporary. The group's staff currently numbers 32.

The Common Market's facilities were running 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Garcia Granados says the Common Market had long identified inadequate infrastructure as one of the hurdles in creating a thriving regional food system. For years, the organization had been building its cold-storage capacity, fleet of refrigerated trucks, and food-safety protocols, and the pandemic gave the group a chance to see what the system it had developed could do.

"We were able to use this moment to really use our infrastructure at the limits," she says.

The nonprofit's ability to expand operations quickly to meet the demand for emergency food was a boon for the farmers the group works with. Before the pandemic, many sold 10 to 20 percent of their produce to the Common Market and relied on restaurants or wholesalers to buy much of the rest. That business fell off precipitously at the start of the pandemic.

"It was terrifying," says Steve Frecon, one of the owners of Frecon Farms, a third-generation orchard in Boyertown, Pa. "When you're dealing with a perishable commodity, it's not as though you can lay off your employees and just stop producing a crop. The crop does not care that there's a pandemic."

Because of the emergency food contracts, the Common Market was able to buy much of the farmers' unsold goods — and build relationships with farmers it hadn't worked with before.

Frecon says the group is a true partner and that weathering the crisis would have been a struggle without the purchases it made. Faced with the challenge of the pandemic, he says, it would have been easy for the leaders of the Common Market to pause operations until conditions improved.

"But they didn't; they fought," Frecon says. "They tried hard to expand and build up their organization. That's special."

Lightbulb Moment

Most USDA food contracts are decided solely on price. But for the Farmers to Families program, the Common Market benefited from a different policy that allowed USDA officials to take other factors into consideration, such as whether the bid supported local farmers.

That meant leafy greens, broccoli, and fresh milk instead of the canned goods and processed food that usually constitute emergency food aid.

> "This was the moment when people needed access to good food more than ever."

"What we saw in that moment was, OK, when the criteria is changed, even just incrementally, it can have a huge impact," Garcia Granados says.

The group now wants to advocate for new policies to make the food in government programs more nutritious and higher quality. It sees policy as a powerful tool to boost the amount of local produce in school lunches and other government programs — and it's optimistic about what's ahead.

"One of the things that's beautiful about our organization is that we work from upstate New York all the way through the Rio Grande Valley in Texas," Johnston says. "We have such a diversity of partners in our work across that geography with diverse experiences and a profound potential to impact the direction of public policy to improve urban and rural communities." ▫

An Early-Childhood Nonprofit Tunes In to Families' Needs and Reconsiders Videocalls

By JIM RENDON

ParentChild+ is not the kind of nonprofit that should have done well during the pandemic. It runs programs with 142 local organizations in 16 states where specialists meet in person with families to help get toddlers prepared for prekindergarten. It provides books, toys, and other material so the children can succeed when they start in a more formal learning environment.

ParentChild+ has always worked in person and thought those visits — 92 per family in the course of the program — were central to its performance. In the past, potential donors suggested the organization use online platforms to save money and boost productivity. But Sarah Walzer, the group's CEO, didn't think its specialists could develop the strong relationships with families that are at the core of its success virtually, so the organization resisted.

But the pandemic changed all of that. The group shifted almost entirely to virtual visits in March 2020. It has been largely successful — and, in some cases, spurred more communication with families. The group discovered that clients relied on it for information, services, and even basics like money and food more than it ever realized. As the health crisis eases, the organization continues to monitor families' needs, and it's looking at how it can find the right balance between in-person visits and virtual sessions.

"A critical aspect of our work is the relationship between the specialist and the parents and the parent and the child," Walzer says. "People didn't think that for anybody it would be possible to re-create that relationship virtually. It turns out that, for some people, it is possible."

Lifeline for Families

Last spring, the group scrambled to stay in touch with families. Early-learning specialists used FaceTime, WhatsApp, and sometimes traditional phone calls if families didn't have the right devices or enough bandwidth for a video call. To its surprise, the group found that the vast majority of clients wanted to continue with the program even as they struggled with being stuck at home, losing jobs, managing remote learning for older children, and the fear of a deadly virus.

The group quickly realized that home-learning specialists were a lifeline for many families. They became an important source of information about food banks and housing advocates, even mask wearing. The organization began to work with diaper banks and started delivering diapers, formula, cleaning supplies, and personal protective equipment, along with toys and books and its usual materials. In some areas, the group delivered food to families and even handed out gift cards and money orders. In the past few months, it has helped inform families about vaccines and make decisions about sending children back into the classroom.

The national organization, which brings in about $4.5 million a year, mostly in foundation grants, raised $450,000 from foundation and United Way emergency Covid funds to pay for this. Its local partners, which together raise more than $20 million a year in local and state funding as well as private grants and donations, also brought in additional money.

"We have such individual relationships and connections to the families," says Whitney Evans, the group's director in the San Francisco Bay Area, where programs started just before Covid hit. "They were just primed to be able to have those conversations with the specialists and talk to them about what their needs were."

Promise of Technology

ParentChild+ raised money to buy computer devices for families that needed them and make sure they had the bandwidth they needed, something that helped older children who were attending school virtually at home. The organization also had to make sure staff had laptops with working cameras and enough bandwidth to do video calls.

The group's early-learning specialists started to send clients videos before visits to help them prepare for what the online visit would be about. Clients responded with their own videos to show their progress reading to their children, for example.

The flexibility of online visits has been an unexpected benefit. If someone is sick or needs to reschedule, it is much easier since the staff doesn't have to travel anywhere. Fathers have been more involved in the video sessions since visits are now sometimes in the evening when more dads are home.

ParentChild+ is starting to assess what the

Continued on Page 16

BUILDING BLOCKS
ParentChild+ helps prepare young children for prekindergarten. Before Covid, the visits between early-learning specialists and families, like this one in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, were all in person.

After the group moved to a virtual platform, parents seemed more comfortable contacting staff members between visits.

Continued from Page 15

success of the past year means for its work going forward. Walzer says the organization will stay attuned to the shifting needs of the families it serves. It hopes staff members won't need to continue dropping off essentials and can go back to connecting people with other services in the community. But the dire need for diapers, which are expensive, has stuck with Walzer. She expects the group will develop relationships with diaper banks or try bulk purchases or other ways to help families get the diapers they need.

She says the group expects to step up its efforts to help people with housing concerns when eviction moratoriums are lifted and clients face more uncertainty about where they will live and how to pay for housing.

The group will continue to work with its existing grant makers to help it meet immediate needs and will assess whether local partnerships can fill those needs starting in the fall. Any additional funding will likely be raised at the local level, Walzer says.

"Although our scope of service is the education of that 2- and 3-year-old child, we really play a larger role in the needs and interests of those families," says Angela Drakeford, the group's North Carolina state director. "That's something that will be with us for years to come."

The organization is also grappling with the role of remote visits going forward. Having an online option available will always be helpful. If someone is out of town or has a conflict, staff can do a video visit. Specialists have also been doing some outdoor visits. The idea of doing visits in places other than the home might make sense in the future, too, Drakeford says.

After families shifted to virtual platforms, they were much more comfortable contacting staff members with questions or to ask for help between visits. Walzer is not sure if that will fade as the economy stabilizes and needs are less severe, but she is glad that clients feel comfortable reaching out and initiating contact.

The biggest challenge is to figure out what combination of in-person and virtual visits is right for which families — and whether the format affects educational outcomes. ParentChild+ is planning a study of the various approaches in the Bay Area. Evans, who leads the program there, thinks that some combination of offerings is likely to work best.

So does Malkia Singleton Ofori-Agyekum, the group's Pennsylvania state director, who has been surprised at how well the online programs went this year across her state.

"We're seeing that we can still get the results we're looking for," she says. "We haven't lost the relationship with the families, which is the most important thing." n