



Warehouse to the Rescue



Hampered by the lack of adequate space for food storage and prep, ALIVE!'s dedicated volunteers and staff have logged many vehicle miles and put in extra hours juggling three different food locations.

You may be familiar with the 801 Payne Street warehouse; volunteers also dashed to the 36-foot refrigerated shipping container at the end of Payne Street, in an old dog shelter parking lot, and a 116 S. Quaker Lane old bus barn to pack the groceries. This is about to change.



“We ended up working with ALIVE! because this funding will return benefits many times over.”

REP. DON BEYER

“We asked, where is the greatest need? There are 100 nonprofits in the 8th congressional district, and we ended up working with ALIVE! because this funding will return benefits many times over,” according to Rep. Don Beyer, referring to the \$1.5 million investment for a dedicated ALIVE! warehouse he secured in the 2022 U.S. government funding bill.

“It’s sad to think that in this strong economy we still need ALIVE! but we do. During the pandemic, there were food lines you couldn’t see the end of. Need is still very great, even in Northern Virginia, as wealthy as we are. ALIVE! asks, what are all the needs, the vaccination needs, housing needs? It is trying to treat the whole family, not just the stomach.”



ALIVE! is in the process of looking for an integrated space offering refrigeration and temperature-control (68 degrees is required) for storing and packing food. Having both functions under one roof will streamline preparations for food distribution. The new warehouse, made possible by the largest gift in the organization’s history, will greatly expand ALIVE!’s ability to offer in-demand fresh food like produce, meat, and dairy.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The last few years have been a tumultuous time for all of us. We are so grateful for the support of our community—the City of Alexandria, member congregations, individual donors and volunteers, local businesses, and foundations. With all of your support, ALIVE! has opened two new Food Hubs (read more on page 7), distributed over 3.1 million pounds of food, connected over 2,000 households to \$2.1 million of rent and eviction relief, relaunched our furniture and housewares programs, and successfully secured stable housing for the families of ALIVE! House—all in the last few years.

With the end of pandemic-era relief benefits, we need to support our neighbors now more than ever. In Alexandria alone, 3,845 households were impacted by the recent decrease in SNAP benefits used for food. With your support, ALIVE! is here to help. With the addition of two Food Hubs in critical areas across the City, plus continued food distributions where they are most needed, ALIVE! is meeting people where they are. And connecting them to additional support they might need through the work of our client service navigators.

Your support helps ALIVE! continue this work. We want to remind you that Spring2ACTion is April 26. This annual day of giving in Alexandria is one of ALIVE!'s largest fundraisers. Please consider donating to support ALIVE! on April 26 at Spring2ACTion.org.

We are so grateful for your support and involvement in ALIVE!.



Mary Eileen Dixon

Mary Eileen Dixon
President



Jennifer Ayers

Jennifer Ayers
Executive Director

**ALIVE! FOOD HUB**

510-F S Van Dorn St, Alexandria, VA 22304

**ALIVE! FOOD HUB**

2601 Mt Vernon Ave, Alexandria, VA 22301

A small grocery store environment where families can choose their own food and get connected to additional services.



THE CRISIS CONTINUES



Federal pandemic relief expanded SNAP for many families, but this extra help ended in February, decreasing the amount of affordable groceries for those on limited budgets. Since then, approximately 3,800 Alexandria households forgo an additional \$95 (average) on top of their normal monthly SNAP payments.

“The number of people depending on our food distributions today is almost as large as we saw at the height of the pandemic; we are now helping about 5,000 households a month,” according to ALIVE! Executive Director Jennifer Ayers.

In the wake of 10 percent food inflation and the SNAP roll back, how is ALIVE! responding?

- Inviting the Alexandria Department of Community & Human Services staff to attend food distributions to sign up clients for SNAP since many who are eligible are not enrolled – even something helps.
- Promoting the Southern Towers and the North End farmers markets where SNAP beneficiaries’ purchasing power doubles when they buy fresh produce.
- Collaborating with Senior Services to help seniors close the nutrition gap caused by the cutoff of extra SNAP benefits.
- Working with tenants facing eviction earlier in the process — some Alexandrians have to make a difficult choice between eating and paying rent so ALIVE! is assisting upfront to save tenants’ money when possible.
- Making sure more food is on trucks at distributions, and encouraging more donations of food to support distribution events and food hub inventory.

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**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
JENNIFER AYERS**

“The crisis caused by the pandemic is not over, but support is waning: SNAP, the pandemic-related Medicaid insurance ending in May, rolled-back federal and state assistance for eviction and food support, and people donating less because they think things are over,” noted Ayers.

The impact of food insecurity on our neighbors has greater negative effects than previously known. A diet lacking nutrition has been shown to predispose adults and kids to poor health, according to a new study published in the journal *Health Affairs*. Cheaper, less healthy food is the go-to solution to strained resources. Eggs, meat, and fresh produce are the first to go. Turning to fast food or more filling food causes weight gain, accompanied by diabetes or high blood pressure.

Consequently, the undernourished spend more on health care than people with reliable access to nutritious food — they pay about 20% more on hospitalization, emergency room visits, and medication. The physical problems are exacerbated by the stress of constantly worrying about food, affecting mental health.

In our region, households with children were twice as likely to experience food insecurity. Alarming, most of those struggling — 77 percent — are employed, typically juggling multiple jobs.

If you would like to help expand ALIVE!’s life-sustaining food distributions, please consider a donation to ALIVE!

Information sources:

- approximately 3,800 Alexandria households: <https://alextimes.com/2023/03/my-view-with-heather-peeler-the-pandemics-long-tail/>
- \$95 in SNAP benefits: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/changes-2023-benefit-amounts>
- 10% food inflation rate: <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/food-inflation>
- 20% more on health care: <https://www.marketplace.org/2023/01/10/food-insecure-households-spend-more-on-health-care/>
- Households with children twice as likely; 77% are employed: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/06/27/1-out-3-people-dc-region-face-food-insecurity-survey-finds/>

A Gift That Keeps on Giving

What about the furniture program inspires volunteer Matt Zahn? “Both the furniture donors and recipients are sharing their lives with us,” Matt explained. “We take a piece of furniture that means something — part of a family’s story — and deliver it to help a vulnerable person or family who trusts you in their home. After a day’s work, this brings immediate fulfillment, and how many things can you say that about?”

A bed was brought to a gentleman fresh out of a housing shelter. He had a job and an alarm clock but no place to lay his head.

One big, last delivery of the day, pre-pandemic, was to an Afghan family in need of dining room furniture, beds, and couches. When Matt called to give the family a heads-up as to the estimated arrival time, the family was very particular about knowing exactly when the truck would show up. As the team carried the furniture into the apartment, wonderful cooking aromas greeted them as the family went about making a new home. After everything had been removed from the truck and put in place the crew was ready to go, but was asked to “wait a moment.” The moment became 15 minutes of standing around looking at each other. Then the surprise: All of the incredible-smelling bread and food had been timed and prepared especially for arrival of the furniture team, now guests in the family’s home.

When not delivering furniture, Matt is the ALIVE! Congregational Representative from Christ Church and a 12th grade English teacher. He began regular deliveries of furniture in 2016, stopped during the pandemic when the program was paused, and started up again in the fall of 2022.



Matt Zahn (center, with red hat) and other volunteers on the first day the Furniture Program was able to deliver after the pandemic.

“Lightly-used mattresses and bed frames are always needed,” Matt said, “but sturdy dining room tables and chairs can be helpful.” The key is that the furniture is in usable condition to avoid disappointment. On most delivery days, the team fills the truck with donations then drops them off on the same run. If there’s an unusable piece, the client expecting that piece might not receive it, or want it.

The furniture crew ventures down streets they’ve never driven before, off the beaten path of more familiar parts of Alexandria, acquainting themselves with their neighbors – refugees, new parents, formerly homeless – in different stages of life, as the crew hands over cherished furnishings from perhaps an older, downsizing family to another family making a fresh start. Are you able to lend a hand? Sign up to volunteer with our furniture program on Saturday mornings by visiting alive-inc.org.



What furniture is needed?

The most frequently requested items are **queen, full, twin,** and **bunk beds**. But small, light furniture is also in demand:

Couches • Chairs • Tables • Dressers



Furniture **not** fit for small apartments:

- Sofa beds
- China cabinets
- King size beds

Where Else Will a Shopping Trip Change Your Life?

Food Hub Service Navigator Ruth Tekle is the person with all the answers — shared in many different languages — to assist shoppers when they step into the Food Hub on South Van Dorn Street. Those who come in search of food can leave with so much more.

Fluent in Amharic, Tigrigna, and speaking some Spanish, Ruth helps clients figure out the gaps in their lives and connects them with vital assistance. Depending on how much rent is owed, or if there is a pending court date for eviction, the family is directed either to ALIVE!, the City of Alexandria, or another entity. She assesses the immediacy of the unpaid utility bills to pinpoint which organization to contact for aid. And if the decrease in SNAP benefits is causing a food shortage, she points families to ALIVE!'s monthly food distributions and other food pantries to supplement what they receive from the Hub. Local service organizations (see sidebar) also have a rotating presence in the Hub.

The ultimate goal of this assistance is “that we work ourselves out of a job,” Ruth noted.

Now open more than a year, over 500 households benefit monthly. The first shoppers were amazed they did not have to hand over cash for the groceries. “You mean to tell me that I do not need to pay?” was a constant refrain.

Who shops here? Some have lost jobs, or receive SNAP benefits yet need more, or their Social Security check is not enough to pay rent and eat. The mostly female clientele consists of mothers bringing children who can play, within eyesight, in a kid-friendly area.

It is recommended that each household stock up once a month, with grocery amounts varying depending on



the size of the household. Popular items like milk, eggs, fresh produce, and the more expensive diapers, wipes, baby formula, shampoo, conditioner and toothpaste fly off the shelves so the heaviest foot traffic occurs when the Hub opens at 11:00 a.m. Tuesday through Thursday, and 10:00 a.m. on Saturdays.

The local influx of Afghan refugees has found the Hub a worthwhile place to shop. Food Hub Assistant Mohammed Hamayon speaks Pashto, Dari, Hindi, and Urdu and assists these newcomers. Learning cultural norms on the job, Ruth is mindful to be respectful of

all cultures and traditions to foster relationships and trust with her clients.

ONE-STOP SHOPPING:

What services are available at an ALIVE! FOOD HUB?

- **Healthy Families Alexandria** provides home-based help to vulnerable first-time parents
- **Senior Services of Alexandria** delivers meals on wheels
- **GO Alex** connects people to transit resources
- **Alexandria Workforce Development Center** offers job information
- **Campagna Center** makes available cradle-to-career education programs
- **Edu-Futuro** provides case management, connecting people to relevant resources.

In the beginning when the Hub opened, it was just Ruth and Mohammed tending to the shoppers, keeping shelves filled, and placing orders, but now a reliable group of volunteers serve. Two such volunteers, Marco van Doeveren and Simona Cipra — who retired from their Massachusetts corporate jobs five years ago and moved to Virginia

to be closer to their children — restock the shelves with an eye to freshness and appeal.

“What do I do with corn on the cob?” they have been asked. How to use pumpkins can be another head-scratcher. Central Americans and Afghans are delighted when Simona and Marco explain that some cans and jars contain familiar ingredients.

A Hub work-in-progress is the development and sharing of culturally conscious recipes so the shoppers will take advantage of a range of unfamiliar fruits and vegetables. The necessity for this was occasioned by the squash incident. The Hub had received a delivery of squash that did not resemble squash that clients were familiar with. So Ruth figured out how this vegetable fit into various cuisines to convince shoppers to try it. By consulting with Hub patrons about their recipe preferences, and offering future cooking demonstrations, Ruth hopes to interest families in experimenting with different produce.

“Constant feedback from clients on what they’d like to see at the Hub, then pursuing donations to meet those

needs is an ongoing project,” according to ALIVE! Executive Director Jennifer Ayers.

“We have been successful in building relationships with people in the West End, and hope to continue to attract households from the North End,” Jennifer noted, comparing the success of the Van Dorn Food Hub to the recently opened second Food Hub on Mt Vernon.

“There are regulars,” explains Marco. “People who live nearby have easy access and enjoy the shopping experience of choosing what groceries they want.”

Despite the regulars, the biggest challenge is spreading the word that the Hub is a life-changing resource, located on a free DASH bus route, to attract more people to shop and connect with local services.

SECOND HUB

The first Hub has been so successful, a second one has opened. Located at 2601 Mount Vernon Avenue near the Mount Vernon Community School — easily accessible by foot or bus — the new Hub had its grand opening on April 12. There is a full-time service navigator, a welcoming and nurturing environment, and an outdoor space to grow vegetables. The news about this Del Ray/Chirilagua location is being spread through mailings to ALIVE!’s community partners and people who show up at food distributions.

“I want to thank all the volunteers who brought everything together for the new location, especially Gerry Hebert and Christine Brown — they helped find, and design a well-thought-out space, got the gas turned on, and made sure the locks work,” said Jennifer. “We have lined up some helpers for this Hub but are still on the lookout for more Spanish-speaking volunteers.”



Save the date!



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OCTOBER 15, 2023 • ALEXANDRIA, VA

ALIVE! *Wire*

Neighbors Helping Neighbors



The oldest and largest private safety net for Alexandrians living in poverty and with hunger, ALIVE! serves thousands of individuals each month by providing **Food, Shelter, and Emergency Help.**

Founded In 1969, ALIVE! is comprised of **49 faith organizations** and thousands of volunteers, partners and supporters.

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