

El Paso churches deliver 320 tons of food to families

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El Paso-area churches representing several denominations have distributed 320 tons of food to families in need the last eight weeks, thanks to El Paso Baptist Association's involvement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farmers to Families Food Boxes program.

"It's open to any church, not just those that are part of our association. It's been exciting to see the community come together," said Larry Floyd, executive director of [El Paso Baptist Association](#).

As authorized by the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#), the USDA launched the [Farmers to Families Food Box](#) initiative as part of the agency's [Coronavirus Food Assistance Program](#). USDA purchases produce, dairy and meat, works with suppliers to package the food into family-sized boxes, and then transports the boxes to food banks, community and faith-based organizations, and other nonprofit organizations that distribute them to families.

Labor-intensive project

Floyd learned about the food box program from Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas and founder of Hearts4Kids in the Rio Grande Valley. Zapata helped him connect with a USDA liaison to faith-based organizations.

"He asked how many trailers of food I wanted," Floyd recalled.



Each trailer sent by the USDA Farmers to Families Food Boxes program to the parking lot of First Baptist Church in El Paso contained 1,456 boxes of food. (Photo courtesy of El Paso Baptist Association)

He discovered each trailer contains 1,456 boxes of food. After contacting churches to determine their level of interest and ability to distribute food, Floyd asked for three fully loaded trailers.

"We had 140 churches involved that first Friday," he said.

The first distribution day, volunteers worked from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the parking lot of First Baptist Church in El Paso. They unloaded the trailers and helped load boxes into cars, trucks and vans driven by church representatives from throughout the El Paso area. In turn, church volunteers delivered the food boxes to families.

"It was a pretty long, hot day," Floyd said.

After the initial experience receiving truckloads of food for distribution, El Paso Baptist Association began taking advance orders of boxes from churches to expedite the process. By taking the advance orders, the association has been able to streamline the process, reducing the time involved from seven hours to less than four hours.

Some small-membership churches have ordered as few as 10 boxes, while some large congregations have ordered the maximum of three pallets loaded with boxes.

Helping churches minister to families in need

"We've been able to help churches of all sizes," Floyd said, noting Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Church of Christ and Roman Catholic congregations have participated.



Each Farmers to Families Food Box typically contains free fruits and vegetables, as well as bags of dried beans. (Photo courtesy of El Paso Baptist Association)

While most of the food boxes have been filled with fresh produce and bags of dried beans, Floyd said the association also was preparing to receive 33 pallets of frozen poultry.

At the end of Phase One of the Farmers to Families Food Boxes program at the end of June, Floyd said churches in the El Paso area will have distributed 35,000 boxes to families—enough food to provide 53,000 meals.

After taking a week off for the July 4 holiday, Phase Two will begin. Floyd hopes to learn on July 6 how churches can be involved in the continuing program.

In addition to benefitting families during a time of crisis, he noted the initiative has built relationships between pastors in the area, some of whom had not been acquainted previously.

"El Paso Association has become recognized in the community for caring about people. We've even had churches that aren't part of the association

ask how they can join," Floyd said.