



A New Home for the State College Food Bank

No one in our community should worry about where their next meal is coming from. Yet the stark reality is that right now, thousands of Centre County residents are struggling to afford food for themselves and their families. Every day, someone in Centre County has to make the hard choice between whether to put food on their table or to pay their rent, heat their house, or keep their lights on. Though it may not always be visible, we are facing a hunger crisis right here in our backyard.

The way we respond to this crisis demonstrates the depth of our values as a community. For forty years, the State College Food Bank has been responding with compassion and commitment, providing free food to low-income families across Centre County through the work of our dedicated staff and the tremendous generosity of those who have donated their time, money, or other resources. But today, in a post-pandemic world marked by inflation, the number of our neighbors in need is growing, and the Food Bank's facilities are no longer large enough to fulfill our mission. We have to make our own hard choices of what donations to keep or turn away, limiting the number of families we can help to feed.

To overcome this challenge, we have secured a new building that will nearly double our service capacity and ensure dignity in every experience for those we serve. We are launching our first ever capital campaign to renovate, expand, and equip the building, creating a facility that will allow us to combat food insecurity in our area more effectively than ever before. This is an exciting transformational moment for the State College Food Bank, and we invite our supporters throughout our community to join us in making this effort a success. Together, we can once again realize our shared commitment to helping our neighbors through difficult times.

The State College Food Bank: Fighting Hunger for Forty Years

Food insecurity is largely a hidden problem in Centre County. The visible wealth around Penn State University and the State College area masks the fact that thousands of our county's residents struggle to afford basic necessities such as food, housing, and healthcare. According to the most recent data (2020) from hunger-relief organization Feeding America, 8.4% of the Centre County population—or more than 13,500 people—experience food insecurity, meaning they lack access at times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Moreover, according to the United Way, 28% of households in Centre County were categorized as ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) in 2018: they are above the poverty level—and often ineligible for government assistance—but make less than what is needed to afford basic essentials, putting them at risk of experiencing food insecurity as well.

This problem is not new, and the State College Food Bank has been offering a powerful solution since 1982. Begun as a small, local operation in the basement of St. Andrews Church, the Food Bank has grown considerably in size and impact. We currently maintain a facility on South Atherton Street and rent storage space in the Nittany Mall. Through our food pantry and other programs, we serve individuals and families from around the county.

We are truly community supported: With no revenue-generating programs, we rely on donations from area individuals and organizations for most of our income, with additional support from government grants.

Volunteers are the backbone of our operation and provide over 12,000 hours of volunteer service each year. We regularly collaborate with a wide range of regional agencies, including other area food pantries and organizations like the Centre County United Way, Strawberry Fields, and Centre Volunteers in Medicine.

While our initial distribution model was to provide the same basic prepacked bag to all clients, we instituted a “Client Choice” model when we moved to our current location in 2014. This allows clients to choose their own food, as in a grocery store, which reduces the stigma of receiving food, leads to greater participation, and reduces food waste. It also allows us to accommodate dietary needs based on health, religious principles, and preference.

We have built an efficient and effective operation to combat hunger in Centre County, providing several thousand people with hundreds of thousands of pounds of food in a typical year. Unfortunately, the last few years have been anything but typical.

A New Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath—in which the cost of nearly everything we buy has sharply increased—have created an uncertain world for everyone. Some families who never worried about how to put food on the table are facing food insecurity, while those who struggled before the pandemic are in even worse circumstances now. We can assume this problem will continue to increase as inflation creeps higher and higher.

As a result, our services are needed now more than ever. In the past year alone, we have seen a stunning 40% increase in individuals served. The staff and volunteers of the State College Food Bank have worked tirelessly since the pandemic started, distributing nearly 1.5 million pounds of food from 2020 to 2022, and have found creative ways to manage the growth in demand. But the situation has highlighted a major problem: our current facilities are simply not large enough to meet the needs of our community. On a regular basis our staff sends hundreds of pounds of frozen meat out of Centre County, turns away donations of fresh produce larger than twenty cases, and spends valuable time moving product and equipment between our two facilities. The solution is clear: the Food Bank needs a new home.

A New Home

Determined to meet the growing needs of our community, the State College Food Bank has purchased a new facility at 169 Gerald Street, State College. At approximately 20,000 square feet, the new building will essentially double our current operating space and will feature a loading dock, a larger walk-in freezer and refrigerator space, dry storage, and produce-prep and food-sorting areas, greatly enhancing our capacity to fulfill our mission.

In the new building, we will be able to accept and store larger donations of perishable foods. The pandemic had forced us to shift temporarily to a labor-intensive, low-contact hybrid distribution model, and we will now be able to re-establish the Client Choice pantry and improve its operations even further. The new space will allow us to better utilize all of the donations we receive, stock a broader selection of culturally responsive foods, and provide a wider variety of food for everyone.

The expanded food-distribution capacity, storage, parking, and overall efficiency will also allow us to not only enhance existing programs but also establish new ones. For example, we can develop a system for delivering personalized grocery orders, offer cooking demonstrations, expand our No-Cost Produce Markets, and

strengthen our ability to supply food to smaller pantries in our area—a crucial element in our plans to effectively combat hunger across Centre County.

How You Can Help

While the cost of purchasing the new building will ultimately be offset by the sale of the current building, we face several major expenses to make it functional. The entire building will be renovated, and we will expand its footprint by adding wings on either end and a loading dock. There are also many expenses related to outfitting the space, including a forklift, shelving, grocery carts, refrigeration and freezer equipment, and security. We are therefore launching a capital campaign to raise \$3,000,000 to ensure that the new facility can fulfill its full potential for impact.

The State College Food Bank has always relied on the generosity of our community members, and at this exciting moment, we must once again turn to our supporters—those who share our deep commitment to feeding our neighbors in need. Because support from people like you will be essential in fully realizing our vision for the Food Bank, we ask you to consider making a gift to this important project.

The new State College Food Bank facility will not only allow us to meet the rapidly growing need and feed more families, but to do so in a dignified, welcoming, and accommodating environment. It will enable us to better support our fellow feeding programs and social service agencies throughout the county. We will be better equipped to catch those individuals and families falling through the cracks, and this, in turn, will make our community stronger. With your partnership, we can grow into the next step of our history together and make sure no one in Centre County will wonder where their next meal is coming from.