



Care For Friends

Care For Friends:
Connecting Chicago's Most Vulnerable With Resources To
Enable A Better Life

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The problem: Hunger and Homelessness in Chicago

In March of 2020, a deadly pandemic now known as COVID-19 forced Chicago into lockdown. The virus shut down businesses across the city, state, country, and the world. [Widespread layoffs caused the unemployment rate to spike to 14% in April of 2020](#) and brought the global economy to its knees. The economic downturn especially adversely affected those who were already experiencing low wages and were susceptible to food and housing insecurity, most of whom were people of color.

[For many Americans](#) however, the financial burden of having little to no savings was not new. Even before COVID spread throughout the world, more than a third of Americans said that they “could not cover an unexpected \$400 home repair or hospital bill without going into debt, or at all.” The pandemic exacerbated these budgetary challenges.

Another stress point is the healthcare system, where many Americans who cannot afford medical treatment turn to hospitals, placing strain on the “free care” that is available there. In fact, a [CDC report](#) released in October 2016 found that among impoverished adults aged 18-64, 26.2% were uninsured. Another [CDC study](#) released in February of 2016 found that “uninsured adults were more likely than adults with private coverage to have visited the ER because they lacked access to other providers. ”

A recent study showed that prior to the pandemic, [49% of Americans](#) were living paycheck to paycheck. Post pandemic, [that number rose to 63%](#). These dire financial situations caused many people to choose between two equally vital needs: paying rent, or paying for groceries. According to Feeding America, [785,890 people in Cook County](#) are food-insecure. There has been a 51 percent increase in this segment of the population since 2018, according to the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Rates are higher among those experiencing homelessness. Prior to COVID, and even while the rest of the nation was

rebounding from the Great Recession, the rates of homelessness in urban centers [was steadily increasing](#).

According to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 76,998 Chicagoans were homeless in 2018. An earlier study by the CCH found that 39.8% of Chicago's homeless were families, 44.5% were single adults, and 21.5% were unaccompanied youth.

Care For Friends' (CFF) direct experience with feeding homeless Chicagoans has also shown that there is a particularly acute need amongst the single adults, particularly men ([10.1%](#) of whom are veterans) aged 18-62, who fall through the cracks of government programs that are in place to support seniors, women, infants, and children.

The solution: A Community Approach to Service

Aware of these challenges, Chicagoans in and around the Lincoln Park community formed Care for Friends to lessen the burdens of hunger and homelessness in the city.

This work dates back to the Summer of 1968, when a local church opened its doors to shelter young people from the violence surrounding the Democratic National Convention riots in Lincoln Park. In the ensuing decades, the support of a single organization has blossomed into a wide-ranging network of strong community partnerships.

Individual volunteers come from the local community, grade schools, universities like Depaul University, other organizations like the Girl Scouts, and senior citizens groups. Financial and in-kind donations are received from individuals (including donors from outside Illinois), businesses of all sizes, including local grocery stores, medical equipment suppliers and restaurants, and philanthropic foundations. We are also proud to be a recognized service partner of Episcopal Charities and Community Services in Chicago.

Government partnerships include close working relationships with the local Alderman's Office, and State Senate and House Representatives who serve as volunteers and support in their official capacities.

Together, this diverse network of strong connections helps provide a wide range of services which are organized and formalized under the umbrella of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

What we do: Large-Scale Impact Through Well-Integrated Services

Food for Friends Meals Program

Three times a week, Care For Friends creates a safe space for anyone who needs a meal. We gather for a no-cost hot lunch served in sit-down, family style where eating a warm meal is as important as being treated with dignity and respect. Rather than providing a cafeteria-style approach to food service, CFF intentionally invites our guests into our space for an hour and a half before the meal is served. We encourage a sense of community and empower our guests to live out their human need to connect with one another.

The pandemic did not stop us. We continued operating safely through the past year without a pause in services, and we were even able to expand programmatic support during this uncertain time.

One of our main reasons our guests come is the exceptionally low barriers to entry are for our guests, who may otherwise be distrustful of organizations they perceive as intrusive as they require personal information. We continue to run services as usual, and in 2021, we expect to serve 11,000 meals to those in need.

Grocery Delivery Service for Youth Experiencing Homelessness

In 2020, as a response to the food-insecurity crisis plaguing the city, Care For Friends launched a grocery delivery program for youth experiencing

homelessness, and their families. These *CarePacks* are delivered directly to where the students are staying, eliminating transportation barriers, and further opening up access to healthy and consistent food sources.

Each CFF CarePack contains 25 to 50 pounds of food per family member, and consists of a collection of non-prepared foods: cooked and uncooked frozen meats, canned and non-perishable food items, fresh milk, eggs, and bread. We also provide kitchen utensils, and recipes on how to cook the CarePack ingredients. In this way, our recipients can learn how to use every single carrot and incorporate it into exciting meals that they look forward to eating. Additional items are also provided through the CFF Clothing or Toiletries programs, as available or requested.

We work directly with teachers and coordinators, who are the closest people to these under-served students. They can identify quickly, and with precision, who will most benefit from CFF CarePacks. This is how we learned of one young man, who was recently orphaned, couch-hopping, and in need of a reliable food source. These kinds of connections are critical in our ability to connect life-saving resources to those who need them most.

Overall, we expect that 300 families and 1,000 individuals will benefit from our grocery service, and that 12,000 pounds of food will be distributed in 2021.

Health and Wellness For Friends

A perennial challenge for homeless Chicagoans is foot care, especially during wet and cold months. Care For Friends guests receive a dry pair of socks and foot care kits in conjunction with evaluations performed by skilled nursing students.

Students conduct a basic health assessment in conjunction with the evaluation; as well as triaging and providing referrals for more serious medical conditions.

Typically, this is the only preventative care our guests are receiving. Through this program, Care For Friends is helping reduce reliance on emergency rooms as a primary source of care for the populations we serve.

As the main source for funding for this program, we received a grant from the Chicago Community Trust in 2020 in order to expand capacity. In 2021, we expect to redirect 75 patients away from local emergency rooms for routine medical care.

Toiletry and Hygiene Kits For Friends

Through this program, our guests receive personal hygiene kits for basic self-care, including soap, shampoo, toothbrushes, toothpaste, razors, and shaving cream. These kits have been amended to address COVID-19 related hygiene needs, and we now also include hand sanitizers, shower wipes, and face masks.

In addition, during their visits to our program, guests have secure access to basic washroom facilities for their personal hygiene needs. In 2021, the Foundation expects to distribute over 10,000 hygiene kits.

Clothing For Friends

Our guests also have access to a seasonal clothes closet, and we distribute over 100 articles of clothes each month. From job interviews to scorching summer days, we work with our guests to make sure that their properly outfitted for a range of situations.

The neighboring community also sponsors a winter clothes drive through the CFF to provide increased support during cold winter months. In 2020, Care For Friends distributed over 400 winter coats and sweatshirts to our guests.

Haircuts for Friends

Our Care For Friends Peace Officer is also a licensed barber and offers hair cutting services to Care For Friends' guests as a way to help them feel and look

better on a daily basis. It also provides our guests with a safe and trusted space to share the issues and stresses that impact their lives through conversations with CFF staff and other guests.

Always in Mind: Guest Diversity

Although our brick-and-mortar services are delivered in Lincoln Park, Care For Friends' programs attract guests from across Chicago – as far South as Washington Heights, and West to Humboldt Park. Although guests are predominantly men aged 18-62 who fall through the social safety nets in place for women, infants, children and seniors, we also regularly serve single, couples, and families of a wide variety of ages.

A significant number of our population are fearful of those in authority roles, and would not receive services from us if multiple questions and/or a registration of some sort were a requirement of participation. However, informal demographic study of our guests suggests that diversity is at the table: a typical meal serves 73% men, and 26% women; and 55% African American, 25% White, 15% Latino, and 5% Asian. These demographics are notably different than those of the Lincoln Park community we are housed in and speak both to the diversity of our programs, and to the need across demographics for our services.

We are also mindful of those who need help but are not able to make it to Lincoln Park. Our outreach Care-Pack program reach recipients in Garfield Park, where 90% of the population is Black or African American, Englewood, where 95% of residents are Black or African American, and Humboldt Park, where of the population is 40.87% Black or African American and 52.01% Hispanic. Expansion efforts are planned for Austin and North Lawndale in 2022.

Continuous Improvement: Leveraging Best Practices through our Services

When considering potential enhancements or expansions to our programs, Care For Friends evaluates a few key points:

1. Is there an existing program in the community that is already serving this need appropriately? Can we partner with them to extend the service to our guests well?
2. Can we incorporate the service seamlessly into the existing experience of our guests?
3. Can it be delivered to our guests with dignity, in a way that maximizes their sense of personal value throughout the process?
4. Can it be administered in a safe and secure manner that doesn't compromise the safety and comfort of our guests, our volunteers, and our uninvolved neighbors?
5. Is there a financial case that supports this service for the long term?

Challenges in our Future

Care For Friends has always placed a high value on community collaboration to address community problems. Because of that, we are fortunate to have a large volunteer base willing to participate in our programs. In fact, we often find ourselves with a waiting list of volunteers willing to serve a meal or participate in other programs. Similarly, our strong partnerships with neighborhood businesses – particularly restaurants and grocery stores – has given us an abundance of food resources with which to build our program. As a result, both of these elements combined to allow us to expand our meal service by 20% in 2020.

Unfortunately, our programs are constrained by the physical space we currently operate in. The program building is an old, wood-frame construction that architects date to approximately the Civil War. It is owned by the Church of Our Saviour (COS). This 150+ year old structure has long outlived its usefulness, and the church which allows us to use it is anticipating a capital construction project in the coming year to demolish and replace the building.

The program building today has a variety of issues that COS feels can be addressed by a modest building project of \$3.5M. This effort would sufficiently address their specific needs, but with a \$7M building, Care For Friends could also expand operations.

COS has expressed an openness to allowing CFF to operate in a bigger space once a new structure is built. This would allow our programs to grow in the following ways:

- Expand hot lunch service seating from 150 guests to 200
- Expand hot lunch service from three to four meals per week; current pantry, refrigerator and stove/oven facilities are unable to support that volume today.
- Expand Care-Pack program recipients from 200 families to 600 annually; we are currently limited by the amount of space available for receiving donations and packing food boxes.
- Increase patients served in foot clinics from 15 per clinic to 30 per clinic, through dedicated, private treatment areas.
- Expand clothing and hygiene services to include shower and laundry facilities to serve our guests who currently use building sinks for these purposes.

Community Funding

Such an expansion raises the building project costs to \$7M, which is beyond the reach of the Church of our Saviour. We have worked together to establish a final budget for the project. It includes:

\$3M Raised by COS

\$500k Debt/Financing by COS

\$1.5M Raised by Community Partners

\$3M to be Raised by Care For Friends

Conclusion

Celebrating 53 years of continued community service in the neighborhood around 530 W. Fullerton, Care For Friends recognizes that issues of hunger and homelessness in Chicago still need to be addressed today. With a 150-year-old program building that has reached the natural end of its life, COS is taking the responsible action of renovation, but potentially at the risk of shrinking their building at a time when we need more space than ever. Our supporters have been generous, but we still have a significant gap in capital support. The ability to close this gap will fundamentally dictate our ability to continue service in Lincoln Park, and neighboring communities, in the coming years.