

AN UNRELENTING DEMAND

SECOND HARVEST NORTHERN LAKES FOOD BANK SERVES AS THE REGION'S FOOD SAFETY NET

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

Walking through the doors of the Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank is like opening the door to thousands of homes across the Northland. Being of service to the community is what motivates and drives this team of dedicated employees and the many volunteers who step in daily to assist in providing access to good, healthy food – everything from dairy to meat, produce to fruit, as well as long-term staples like canned goods and boxed products.

Executive Director Shaye Moris has led the food bank since she applied for the job in 1998. She admits some of her friends scoffed at her for heading into the nonprofit realm. "When I worked in the for-profit world it felt like I was always trying to meet a bottom line. When I came here," she says in comparison, "we're always trying to make sure we can provide the best support and service to people in the community, and that just feels different. I think I just led with my heart."

The Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank has its origins in the economic recession of the early 1980s, when a group of

civic leaders and citizens pieced together a grassroots effort to provide food and general supplies to thousands of unemployed miners on the Iron Range. The then aptly named Arrowhead Food Bank opened in Gilbert, supplying 14 area food shelves.

Nearly a half-century later there is still the misconception within the community that we are a food "shelf" says Moris. "We're not a food shelf, we are the region's only food 'bank.' As the region's food bank,

we provide service, in terms of nationally and regionally donated purchased food, to 40 area food shelves in northeastern Minnesota and northwest Wisconsin." Additionally, Second Harvest Northern Lakes operates its own direct service programs, serving 6,000 people per month, not just in the Duluth area, but in the eight-county region around Lake Superior.

In the charitable food sector, organizations like Second Harvest see an unrelenting demand from





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- SHAYE MORIS, SECOND HARVEST NORTHERN LAKES FOOD BANK EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

the community. Recent statistics show an increase of 31% more people this year, compared to last year, in the region's food shelves. "Our food shelf has had a huge increase in use. I think we're serving about 4,000 people per month. There's a high level of need that we're seeing right now that we haven't seen in years past," says Moris.

In urban Duluth, there's an even greater need. "We have a higher rate of food insecurity than the eight counties that we serve in northeastern Minnesota, North-western Wisconsin, amongst our general population and population of children, when you compare it to the state average in both Minnesota, Wisconsin, so a higher level

of need up here to support."

Out of their Air Park warehouse at 4503 Airpark Boulevard, the Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank operates four direct service programs. We have a food shelf that operates within our food bank building, says director Moris. The food shelf is open Tuesdays in their Air Park space, providing groceries in a drive-through format.

"We have a Mobile Food Pantry program that operates in five rural communities, Hurley and Solon Springs, Wisconsin, and Cloquet, Grand Portage and Grand Marais. That's basically like a food shelf on wheels. We bring a truck into a community that typically has a high level of need and low food

resources. Community volunteers help us set up pallets, people drive through and we give them their food, and we come back to Duluth hopefully with an empty truck."

The food bank also has a contract with the state of Minnesota for the Nutrition for Seniors Program, which is a box of USDA food provided to seniors who fit a certain income qualification that are residents of Minnesota. "We provide these food boxes to seniors in about 32 different locations in northeastern Minnesota," says Moris. In affiliation with the Feeding America program, Second Harvest participates in their "backpack" program for school-age children. "We mobilize local sources of food and distribute those to about 18 school districts and 50 different schools throughout the region. The children take home this little weekend bag of food in their own





backpack or book bag and it provides food security on weekends to about 1,000 children per week in our region."

The food bank operates similarly to any wholesale food distributor, the caveat being their status as a nonprofit. Food products generally arrive in one of two ways to the warehouse. On average, four to five semi-trailers arrive weekly with national products from outside of the Duluth region. "In addition, we have trucks that go out to the entire region, picking up product that is available regionally

challenges of hunger in the areas that we serve and do business in says Patrick Miner, president of Miner's, Inc./Super One Foods. "They're extremely respected by the community. Super One, being in the business that we're in, are extremely proud to be able to help them so that they can stretch the dollars that are donated to the food bank."

Miner is the third generation of his family to serve on the board of directors of Second Harvest Northern Lakes, continuing a tradition of giving back to the community.

food recovery program, where the food bank stops at each Super One store daily to pick up food. "The food that they're being provided is very much the same products that we're receiving and selling at our stores," says Miner. "I don't have the numbers specifically, but the amount of fresh food that the food bank now receives in comparison to even five years ago is a remarkable change, which is obviously very important to ensure that people are maintaining healthy diets. It's not all processed foods," he says. "There's a tremendous amount of



Katie Cleveland, development and volunteer coordinator.

from major retailers," says Moris. "That product also either goes directly to an agency partner in the Twin Ports, or it comes back to our facility for a wider distribution throughout the region."

The food bank has had tremendous success in battling the

"We're both in the food business, and both play an important role in feeding people, assisting others that are in need in order to be able to make ends meet and nourish their bodies."

Super One Foods participates quietly behind the scenes, and in public facing ways such as the





perishable products that are now part of the program."

"Most of our national product lands in the Twin Cities, the point of origin for the larger semis. Second Harvest Heartland in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, serves as sort of a distribution hub for the state," explains Moris. "They're our hub, they hold their product for us, but we're independent food banks; we're not associated with them."

In the nonprofit world, nothing happens without community support and involvement. The team at Second Harvest Northern Lakes is grateful to all the support they receive locally. "I would like to give a shout out to Jon Vinje of Halvor Lines in Superior. They came to us and said, 'Hey, we want to really help the community, how can we help?'" Moris notes that Halvor Lines has been delivering on average a semi load of product every

"We're doing our part to provide a food safety net that strengthens communities where many of our drivers and employees live and work."

- CEO JON VINJE, HALVOR LINES CEO

week for the organization, roughly a \$30,000 in-kind contribution.

"We've had a great partnership with Second Harvest for many years now," says Halvor Lines CEO





Jon Vinje. "It's a great way to give back to the community and a natural fit for us, given the resources we have as a trucking company."

Halvor Lines has partnered with Second Harvest since 2010 when Vinje first reached out to offer assistance, transporting food from Second Harvest's facility in Duluth to regional food banks. Since then, Halvor Lines drivers have transported perishable and non-perishable food twice a week to food banks across northern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin.

"I think everyone at Halvor Lines is proud to be working with Second Harvest, including our drivers," adds Vinje. "We're doing our part to provide a food safety net that strengthens communities where many of our drivers and employees live and work."

Once the product arrives at the Duluth facility, it is inventoried and entered into the distribution network software. "Product is available on an online agency order system called the Agency Express. So, for example, if you are a food shelf in Ely you can access the portal, and



Darin Schuman, driver/distribution center associate.

you can order the products that you want for your agency," explains Moris. When an order is placed at the warehouse in Duluth a member of the operations staff picks the order and sets it for delivery. Most of the product is delivered out to the local agencies in one of Second Harvest's fleet of six trucks.

The sophisticated software helps Second Harvest Northern Lakes ensure equitable distribution of its food products. "Say that we get ground beef, and everybody would love to come in and snap up all the ground beef," says Moris by way of example. "We have an allocation system, where based on statistics size, you would have availability of up to a certain amount based on the size of your agency. That again, ensures equity in terms of if it's a popular product."

When it comes to the nation's food supply chain, there are often misconceptions about the products





distributed through food shelves and food banks. "People need to be assured. You're never gonna have a food safety issue," explains Morris about this hot topic. "When we talk expiration dates for products, the only products that we cannot distribute after a real expiration is baby food or baby formula. That's a USDA requirement. I think most people in our nation don't understand a Best If Used By date, which is on pretty much all products, the exception might be milk or dairy. We like to tell people there are a lot of products that have a date on it, but you can go six months to two years beyond the date," explains Morris. "The only thing that's ever going to decline is taste and freshness or quality."

In terms of their product, Second Harvest Northern Lakes does not distribute expired food. "We pick up a lot of produce and dairy from local retailers. We have volunteers that comb through those clamshells, weeding out the stuff that doesn't look good. We do our best to provide quality product."

The introduction of fresh food,

fruits and vegetables has been one of the biggest changes to the food bank since the program developed, breaking down the myth that food banks and food shelves are primarily stocked with canned and boxed goods.

"Fresh produce is right up there," says Morris, who notes that about two thirds of their product also meet the USDA MyPlate standards. "In addition to fresh produce, we have dairy and other products. If you look at a measurement of what it looks like for our product, we know that two thirds of it meets that USDA standards. It feels good that we're not only providing food, but good food to people." In addition to food, Second Harvest Northern Lakes also distributes other grocery products, such as hygiene products, household cleaners; pretty much anything donated within the grocery industry is available.

Second Harvest Northern Lakes has a lean staff of 19 full-time employees, mostly in the operations area consisting of distribution center associates and



truck drivers. To compliment the full-time staff, the food bank relies on volunteers to perform many of the tasks associated with the distribution of food. In addition to the warehouse work, three staff members work on the program side, with additional employees handling fundraising, communications and finance.

Moris says the magic really happens with the help of hundreds of volunteers. In 2022, she estimates that approximately 1,200 regional volunteers contributed hours equivalent to 9.6 full-time positions, saving the food bank nearly \$300,000 in staff expense. "That's pretty incredible," says Moris. "Our volunteers are critical."

When Moris started in 1998 the food bank had just built their Air Park location. The facility has served them well, but the demand has simply overwhelmed the available space. In August, 2022



SHNL purchased a new building, the former Ikonics facility at 2302 Commonwealth Avenue. Since the purchase the food bank has been working with the architects at DSGW and Johnson Wilson Constructors to finalize the interior details.

"We're in the silent phase of our \$20 million capital campaign. We purchased the building and now we need to raise the remaining \$13 million for the

refurbishment addition. Almost 30 percent of that will be dedicated to a 10,000-square foot freezer cooler at a cost of probably \$2.5 to \$3.5 million. The rest is a lot of parking and outdoor space for our volunteers and the participants we serve," says Moris. "Our plan, if all goes for fundraising as planned, is to break ground sometime in the spring of 2024 and hopefully be in that site by the end of 2024."

The program does not receive




Architectural Renderings by DSGW



state or federal financial support, says Moris, debunking yet another myth about how food bank's function. Moris expresses gratitude for all the contributions they receive from the public; "people like you and I," and from contributions by corporations, business, social and religious groups. "For every one dollar we can distribute about \$7 worth of groceries. That's a big impact, so financial support is always very helpful."

"I came from the for-profit world and never looked back at my 25-year career," concludes Moris. "It's just so heartwarming to hear the stories of people who maybe came in and just needed help for a short time and then came back and said, 'Guess what, now

I'm in medical school,' 'Now I'm an anesthesiologist, that just happened.' It's just heartwarming to hear how just that little bit of support that we provide is led to greater success, long-term success; getting somebody by in a hard time. I feel like that's just really rewarding for all of us that work here at Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank." 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.