

THE LOCKER PROJECT VOLUNTEERS SET UP A FRESH FOOD TABLE AT AN OUTDOOR COMMUNITY EVENT.



GETTING FOOD TO WHERE THE HUNGRY KIDS ARE

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THE LOCKER PROJECT SHARES TONS OF FOOD IN GREATER PORTLAND AREA

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Feeding thousands of children at risk of going hungry in the evenings, on weekends, and during school breaks is a huge job, one requiring serious logistical prowess and a nuanced approach to addressing food insecurity. It's a job the Scarborough-based Locker Project fully embraces.

With seven staff members and over 100 active volunteers, the Locker Project moves hundreds of thousands of pounds of rescued and donated food through its inconspicuous warehouse in a nondescript part of town. There, volunteers inspect, portion, and bag the food to be shared with schoolchildren and their families in the greater Portland area.



The program supplies families with produce and pantry staples to better set them up for making healthy meals at home. “The schools serve as the distribution channel,” says Kathryn Sargent, the Locker Project’s executive director. “Our program gives school staff a tangible resource they can hand to kids and say: ‘Take this home—it will help your family.’”

School staff and social workers discreetly identify food-insecure students, and then Locker Project staff, volunteers, and partners make sure they get fed, whether the food is delivered via the program’s van, distributed by partner agencies, or made available for pickup at community events. Kids and their families bring the food home in sturdy bags colored bright green (containing fresh produce and bread) or purple (containing shelf-stable pantry foods).

The program focuses on distributing meats as well as nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables like local berries in season, fingerling potatoes, broccoli, and cooking greens—foods that will improve children’s learning capacity, health, and future.

A large portion of the food the Locker Project shares comes from Good Shepherd Food Bank and that organization’s partnerships with local farms and supermarkets. Project staff and volunteers rescue other food from businesses like Rosemont Market and Standard Baking Co. in Portland.

The program was born in 2011 when a Portland public-school parent, Katie Wallace, began delivering extra food to her daughter’s kindergarten class after noticing that some kids had nothing to eat at snack time. With funding from Good Shepherd Food Bank, Wallace set up a food pantry in the school nurse’s office, regularly replenishing it with healthy snacks for all kids who needed them.

A cornerstone of the Locker Project’s mission is to destigmatize hunger. No paperwork is required for families to participate in this program. “If people are coming to us for food, they are in fact in need, and that’s enough,” says Sargent.

By 2015, pantries had sprouted up in nine other schools. By 2016, that number had grown to 17. Today, the Locker Project partners with over 40 schools and agencies to share food with families in Portland, South Portland, and Westbrook. Metrics for the year ending 2021 show that the project shared 450,000 pounds of food with kids and their families.

During the summer, the Locker Project hosts fresh food tables at summer school sites, parks, and outdoor community events. Families can follow the project’s website and Facebook page for information about these events.

Last year, the Locker Project extended its reach to more children by sharing healthy food with New Mainer families living in area hotels. Volunteers delivered more than 22,000 pounds of food to the South Portland Quality Inn in 2021. As demand for food assistance continues to grow, the organization is working on plans for a facility in South Portland that will have more cold storage and space to accommodate more volunteers, enabling the project to reach additional families in need.

Despite its measurable impact, Sargent explains, a program like the Locker Project cannot solve food insecurity in Maine on its own; a real solution will require national systemic change. “Child hunger doesn’t only hurt the child and the family—it hurts everyone. It undercuts our future. If people came to understand that, there might be the political will to actually do something about it,” she says. In the meantime, the Locker Project will continue to share good, healthy food with hungry kids and their families in the Greater Portland area.

For more information about the Locker Project, go to mainelockerproject.org. 