

COVID SPURRING COLLABORATIONS

A common supportive phrase throughout the pandemic has been ‘we’re all in this together.’ The necessity of working together and being adaptable to help benefit the entire community has perhaps never been more apparent.

When the pandemic upended business as usual, the Alliant Energy Center was nimble and responsive to community needs and has become the area’s nexus for COVID-19 response. The Alliant Energy Center’s leadership and staff have utilized their business acumen and community knowledge to help provide essential public services and important connections between non-profit organizations and the public they serve.

COVID-19 TESTING

The Alliant Energy Center is one of the main free COVID-19 testing locations in the greater Madison area and has been serving southcentral Wisconsin for the past seven months. The testing site has been recognized as one of the most efficient sites in the country based on tests per hour and has had the highest testing volume in the entire state. Since it opened, the Alliant Energy Center testing site has operated as a “no questions asked” site that does not require individuals to have symptoms nor present any kind of identification. The site has made it possible for thousands of people each week to be safely tested for the virus. Alliant Energy Center staff, the National Guard, public health officials and testers have worked closely to ensure people receive tests safely and efficiently. Recently, public health operations have also added flu immunizations to the campus offerings.

FOOD DISTRIBUTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit vulnerable families hardest and many people are struggling to keep food on the table. Feeding America, a national hunger relief organization, estimates there has been a 61 percent increase in food insecurity in the 16-county area served by Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin since the pandemic began. Kris Tazelaar, Director of Marketing and Communications for Second Harvest says from mid-March through mid-September, Second Harvest distributed 420,000 boxes of food. That’s a 65 percent increase from the same period last year.

COVID has meant that not only do more people rely on the food supplied by Second Harvest, but the agency needed to change the way it distributed that food.

“Now everything has to be sorted and packed into boxes for no contact distribution. Our fixed warehouse size wasn’t big enough,” Tazelaar explained. “We needed to find space for additional food, space to package and maintain social distancing. When COVID hit, we made a phone call and asked, ‘Is there any way you can help us out?’ They said ‘yes, absolutely. We want to help you and the community.’ We simply couldn’t help the people we need to without Alliant Energy Center.”

Alliant Energy Center isn’t charging Second Harvest any rental fee for the use of the space. And considering how the pandemic has strained the agency’s funds, that’s important. Tazelaar says that unbudgeted costs during the pandemic have reached \$5.5 million to cover the cost of purchasing additional food and hiring personnel to sort and pack boxes. To put that amount in perspective, Second Harvest’s annual budget is usually in the neighborhood of \$6 million.

Food pantries in 16 counties stretching across Southern Wisconsin rely on Second Harvest to supply the food that they pass on to hungry families. Being able to utilize the Alliant Energy Center for sorting,

packing and loading trucks means that the supply of food to these pantries and families isn't interrupted. In addition to supplying food to area pantries, Second Harvest also does some direct food distribution through its mobile pantries that travel throughout the area. And when this year's Juneteenth celebration needed to be adjusted, Alliant Energy Center served as the location for approximately 1,000 families to receive boxes of food.

"People lined up in their cars and we put the boxes of food in their trunks. We distributed 100,000 pounds of food in five hours. We were really hustling but it all worked great. We're so thankful for the incredible generosity of the Alliant Energy Center," Tazelaar explained.

FARMERS' MARKET

The Alliant Energy Center has become a food distribution point in another way as well. When the pandemic threatened the hugely popular downtown Dane County Farmers' Market, organizers began considering options for how to get healthy, locally sourced, fresh food to eager customers while supporting small businesses in our community. Initially the Dane County Farmers' Market offered local food pickup at Madison's Garver Feed mill, but the parking lot proved to be too small and traffic congested neighborhood streets. So, organizers started contacting various locations as they looked for a more viable solution.

"Immediately Alliant Energy Center stepped up and said it could provide space," says Sarah Elliott, Market Manager for the Dane County Farmers' Market. And plans were made to use some of Alliant Energy Center's expo space, but plans had to shift when the Alliant Energy Center became a COVID-19 testing site.

"We're so grateful for all of their support and especially how they continued to work with us when the expo space began being used for COVID testing. They've been fantastic to work with. They've been on our team and willing to work with us as we added walk up," Elliott says. "And their expertise in event management addressed things we hadn't even thought of. They have the infrastructure pieces we needed — like orange traffic cones and bike racks."

Willow Island has been hosting the Farmers' Market and Elliott says the space works perfectly. She says it is large enough to easily allow six feet socially distancing for customers and a 12-foot distance between vendors. The large space means customers have the ability to stroll safely through the market and easily select the produce and products they want.

Elliott explains that providing both drive-thru and in-person shopping meets everyone's needs. Approximately 400-500 customers have regularly been taking advantage of the drive-thru option and those numbers didn't change when in the in-person option was added.

"The hybrid model grounded our understanding that different customers have different needs. We want to serve as many customers in ways they are comfortable with."

The Farmers' Market doesn't keep track of vendor sales, but Elliott notes that pre-order drive-thru vendor sales have topped \$845,000. Some vendors, such as those who sell plants and meat, noticed brisk business when folks were concerned about meat shortages and began tending gardens and doing landscaping.

For folks who miss the food trucks that pre-COVID lined the Capitol Square, they too can check out the Alliant Energy Center campus. Each Friday from 4 to 8 p.m. Willow Island is the site for Food Truck Fridays. Local food trucks sell their specialties to eager customers in social-distanced safety.

The Alliant Energy Center will continue hosting both the Farmer's Market and Food Truck Fridays until late October. COVID testing and the Second Harvest will both likely continue to utilize Alliant Energy space for the foreseeable future. Alliant Energy Center remains committed to help answer community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

VITAL COMMUNITY RESOURCE

In addition to the testing and food distribution functions, the AEC campus has also served a wide range of other organizations that have used the space to provide a variety of community functions in a safe, distanced way. Such activities have included:

- Church services/religious ceremonies
- Driver training courses
- [Drive-In Fireworks](#) – Sponsored by Festival Foods, WKOW and Forward Madison FC
- Fire Department ladder truck training
- [Food Truck Fridays](#)
- [Juneteenth Giveaways](#) – coordinated by the African American Council of Churches
- Movie Nights