

Spreading food with a side of literacy, census education in Latino community



Chris Chavez of West Chicago loads up a truck with food boxes and milk as hundreds stopped by a Northern Illinois Food Bank drive-through food distribution Thursday in Elgin. Families were given milk, diapers, children's books and about 10,000 pounds of food providing roughly 8,000 meals for more than 1,000 people.

(Mark Welsh | Staff Photographer)



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Updated

5/30/2020 4:28 PM

An Elgin group is finding new ways to promote early literacy and educate Latino families about 2020 Census participation during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (<https://www.elginpartnership.org/>) and community partners distributed 250 boxes of food, roughly 2,000 diapers and hundreds of bilingual children's books and literacy materials during a drive-through event Thursday. It was co-sponsored by Elgin Township, the Northern Illinois Food Bank mobile pantry, Illinois Census Office and Illinois Latino Caucus Foundation.

"We really had to change our focus pretty quickly and in some ways have turned into a social service organization for a bit," said Amber Peters, EPEL executive director. "We know that if families' essential needs are not met first, reading is not at the top of the (priority) list."

One milk, two milk:

Elected officials and Latino community leaders helped provide 2020 Census information and assistance to hundreds of Latino families during the drive-through food distribution Thursday in downtown Elgin.

"These are the hard-to-count communities," said Karina Nava, a board member of Elgin Partnership for Early Learning, part of Elgin's Complete Count Committee. She added, officials are planning to do more census outreach amid handing out boxes of milk, food, diapers and books at future events.

To complete the census online, visit 2020census.gov

(<http://www.2020census.gov>) or call (844) 330-2020 for English or (844) 468-2020 for Spanish assistance.

Peace award:

Dr. Zaher Sahloul, a Syrian American pulmonary specialist from Burr Ridge, will receive the 2020 Gandhi Peace Award.

Among notable recipients of the prize -- awarded since 1960 by Promoting Enduring Peace -- are Eleanor Roosevelt, Benjamin Spock and César Chávez. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., also was chosen for the award but passed after being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace a few months later, according to the nonprofit's website.

(<https://pepeace.org/gandhi-peace-award>)

Sahloul was past president of the Syrian American Medical Society Foundation (<https://www.sams-usa.net/>) from 2011 to 2015 and led volunteer medical missions to care for Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. In 2012, SAMS launched the "Save Syrian Lives" campaign. The group sponsors field hospitals and ambulances in Syria, trains and hires Syrian medical personnel and sends lifesaving humanitarian aid and medical equipment. SAMS currently operates in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Bangladesh and Egypt.

Sahloul, 55, now is president of MedGlobal, (<https://medglobal.org/>) a group of medical volunteers providing free health care to refugees and displaced people in disaster areas. He works in a COVID-19 unit at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn.

Community kitchen:

Dozens of volunteers from the Sikh Religious Society Palatine Gurdwara have been preparing and distributing hundreds of meals through the center's community kitchen to families in need.

They deliver 250 to 300 meals to the local Salvation Army every Saturday. The gurdwara's COVID-19 support group also has been helping families with food and medication deliveries, said society President Pardeep Singh Gill.

Food shortage:

Volunteers from local faith and community organizations helped distribute 42,000 pounds of chicken Saturday to immigrant families at Wheaton Bible Church in West Chicago. The meat was donated by Max Hurtado, president and CEO of Chicago-based Amigos Meat.

West Chicago has the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases -- 688 -- in DuPage County. Hispanics comprise 53% of the cases.

"The immigrant community in West Chicago has been substantially hit by COVID-19," said state Rep. Karina Villa, of West Chicago. The demand for food assistance also has increased dramatically among "essential workers" and immigrants who have lost their jobs, she added.

"The community partners have numerous food drives and hundreds of people drive away empty-handed," Villa said. "(It) brings attention to the need because a lot of times the Latino communities in the suburbs are forgotten about."

Free summer meals:

As school is out, children and families that rely on free or reduced-price

meals through the National School Lunch Program no longer have access to food.

The Summer Food Service Program provides free healthy meals and snacks to children and teens up to 18 years old at hundreds of sites statewide.

Families can find their nearest summer meals site by calling (800) 359-2163, texting "FoodIL" to 877-877 or visiting summerfeedingillinois.org. (<http://summerfeedingillinois.org/>)

Open meal sites don't require a fee, signup, proof of identity or legal status for anyone 18 and under to receive a free meal. Closed meal sites require signup and sometimes a small fee to participate. These include summer camps or other programs that require registration.

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