

## 'No one expected it to go on as long as it has.' Food insecurity crisis continues one year after COVID-19 hit

By RICK MENNING

March 26, 2021 at 6:47 p.m.



Jill Schimming Taddeo, left, Neil Greenfader, and Rachel Weiser, right, of GL Homes, load food into cars at the Ezell Hester Community Center in Boynton Beach. (Joe Cavaretta / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The first car arrived at the Ezell Hester Community Center in Boynton Beach at 1 a.m. Thursday, March 11, a full seven hours before Feeding South Florida would start loading up a week's worth of groceries into the trunk.

By 5 a.m., the line was backed up from the center's 1901 Seacrest Blvd. location to Gateway Boulevard, which is nearly a mile and a half away.

In just 45 minutes, all the boxes had been handed out but none of the about 725 vehicles whose drivers had waited patiently overnight left empty-handed as vouchers were provided.

"We are still seeing the elevated need for support," said Feeding South Florida Executive Vice President Sari M. Vatske, who came over for the event from the nonprofit's headquarters on Park Ridge Road in Boynton Beach.

While the pandemic may be turning the corner in other respects thanks to vaccinations, food insecurity is showing no such reversal in course as the crisis recently passed the one-year mark.



A Boynton Beach Police officer directs a line of cars at the Hester Community Center in Boynton Beach.

"People have maxed out their credit cards, plowed through savings, have mortgage deferments that are coming due...nothing is getting better in that regard," Vatske said. "Even before COVID-19, we were serving 706,000 food insecure individuals so that's not really a number to sneeze at. That's pretty significant."

Thanks to a \$10,000 donation from GL Homes, which fully funded the March 11 distribution, every vehicle in line received either enough food to feed up to a family of four or a voucher to visit the nonprofit's 5,000-square-foot facility across town for a pickup.

For volunteers like Jill Schimming Taddeo, getting to the Hester Center early and seeing the smiles on the faces of those whose well-being depends on events like this leaves her emotional.

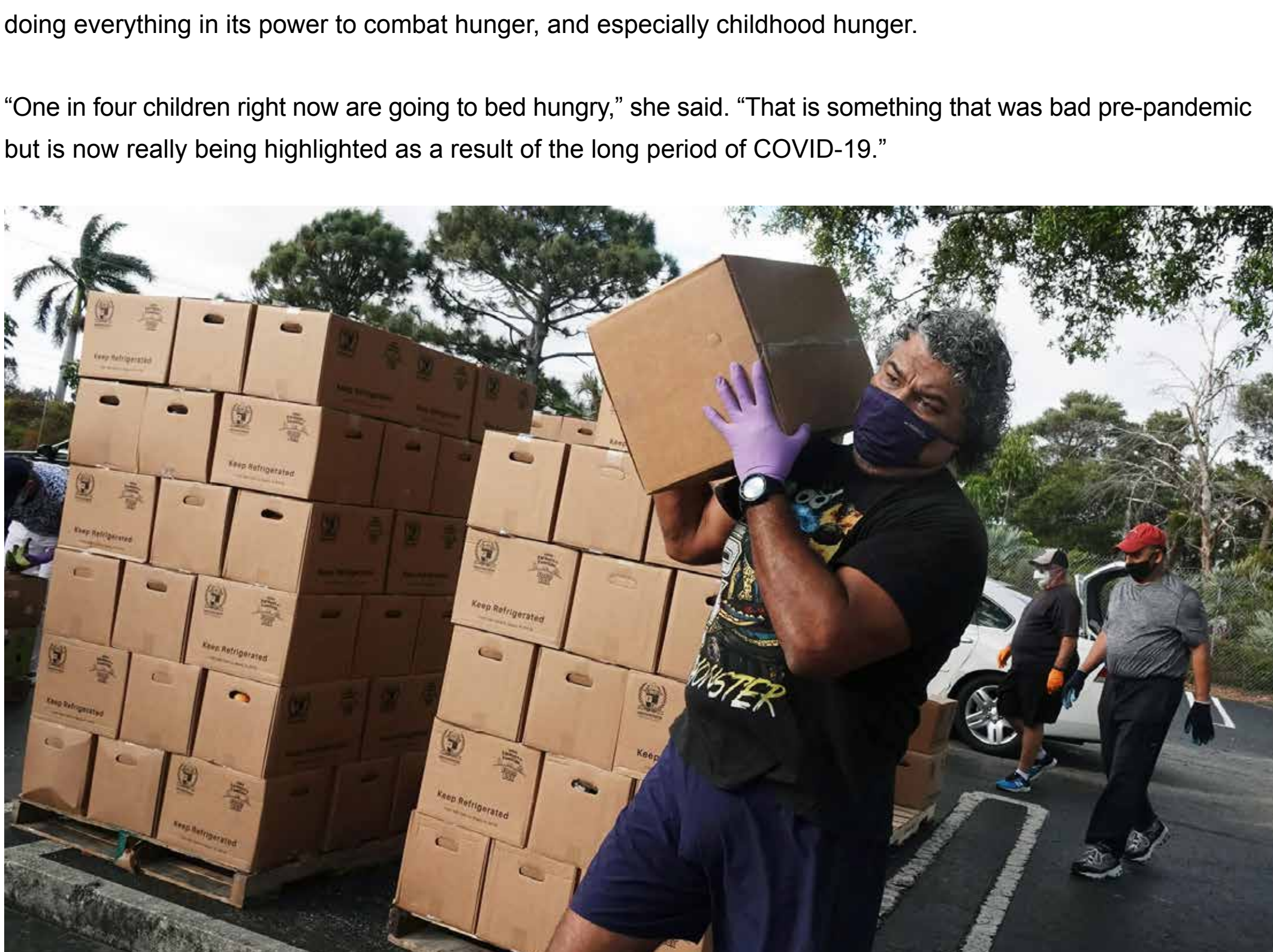
"It breaks my heart to know there's so much food insecurity," said Taddeo, who works as operations manager at GL Homes and was one of 20 helping to load the food into trunks. "I know there are people here today who desperately need this food. It's worth my time and effort to help them."

How bad is the desperation? Vatske shared one conversation with an unemployed parent that she said was shocking to hear.

"One mother told me that some afternoons one of her children might get a sandwich while the other is given a slice of bread and it alternates as the home's food supplies dwindle until the next distribution," she said.

Vatske is adamant that such a scenario is "absolutely unacceptable" and vows that Feeding South Florida is doing everything in its power to combat hunger, and especially childhood hunger.

"One in four children right now are going to bed hungry," she said. "That is something that was bad pre-pandemic but is now really being highlighted as a result of the long period of COVID-19."



Jurgen Oliver carries boxes loaded with food.

In all, Vatske said over 38,000 pounds of food was given out at the Hester Center event alone. The groceries included bananas, dried cherries, pasta, lentils, spaghetti sauce, milk, fresh chicken, oranges, carrots, cheese, turkey and yogurt.

Along with the cars, people were lined up on the sidewalk with shopping carts.

"It's a very humbling experience to be a part of what Feeding South Florida is doing," said Sarah Alsofrom, the director of community relations and the head of GL Homes' philanthropy division. "No one expected it to go on as long as it has."

Yet it continues, which means Neil Greenfader is also going to continue to do what he loves and provide volunteer support as he joined Taddeo and the others.

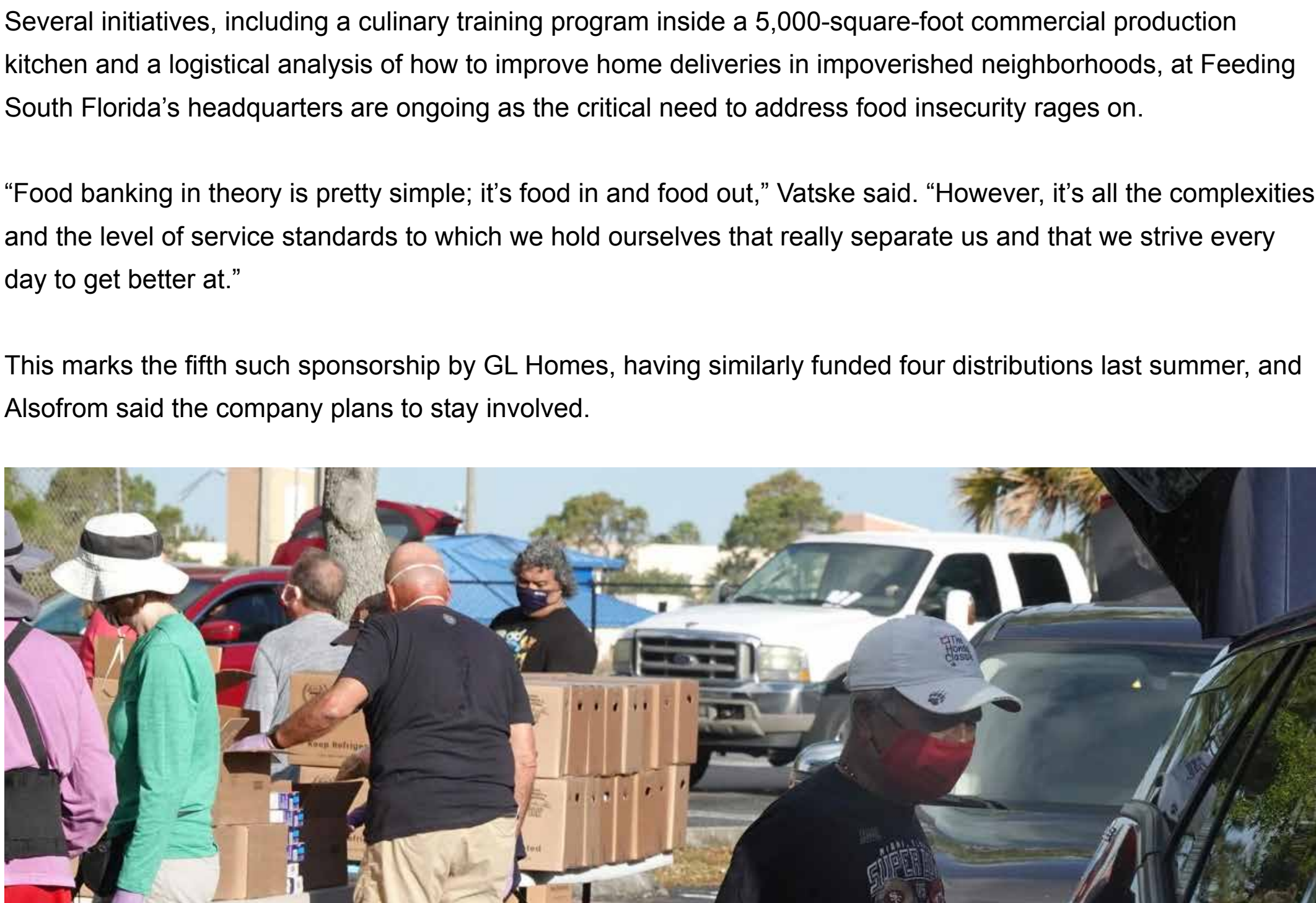
"One of my missions in life is to give back to others," said Greenfader, who also works for GL Homes as a sales consultant. "I have a beautiful and healthy family for whom I am grateful."

"I never want to see anyone go hungry. I don't want people to be without food on the table," he said. "Knowing that we're at the one-year mark of this pandemic, what better time than now to help others less fortunate?"

Several initiatives, including a culinary training program inside a 5,000-square-foot commercial production kitchen and a logistical analysis of how to improve home deliveries in impoverished neighborhoods, at Feeding South Florida's headquarters are ongoing as the critical need to address food insecurity rages on.

"Food banking in theory is pretty simple; it's food in and food out," Vatske said. "However, it's all the complexities and the level of service standards to which we hold ourselves that really separate us and that we strive every day to get better at."

This marks the fifth such sponsorship by GL Homes, having similarly funded four distributions last summer, and Alsofrom said the company plans to stay involved.



Volunteers load food into cars.

"We are still seeing extreme need, and it shows that people are still struggling on a daily basis with hunger and food insecurity," she said. "We need to keep the momentum going. This is a marathon and not a sprint."

Feeding South Florida recently took a major step by partnering with Amazon Flex to deliver food boxes to the needy.

"We also have our own direct delivery with GPS-installed vehicles and the technology needed to get to the right places the meals that we make in our kitchen," said Vatske, who noted that the nonprofit's client management team works diligently to assure that food is going out to those who are hit especially hard.

"This has been an unprecedented year; there's been a lot of trauma," she said. "But there's also been a lot of lessons learned. When things open up again, there's still going to be a long-term economic recovery...we'll be here to help families as long as necessary."

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