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During pandemic, Facebook expands high-end grocery donation program



Facebook distributes high-end groceries to local families through its mobile market truck. Courtesy Facebook.

by Kate Bradshaw / Almanac

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook is providing free and heavily subsidized food to local families facing food insecurity.

The company [has told workers](#) that those who can work remotely should plan to do so until the end of the year, according to the Washington Post, which will likely curb the volume of food it's expected to provide free to on-campus workers. At the same time, one of Facebook's less well-known efforts, its mobile food market, has expanded to meet new needs since the pandemic struck. Since 2017, Facebook has offered free and heavily subsidized produce and food products to Belle Haven and East Palo Alto residents through its "mobile market" – a farmers market on wheels.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, its operators, like many food providers, had to adapt to enhance health and safety precautions while serving a rapidly growing number of people who need support.

Since the pandemic started, the program has expanded dramatically, increasing the number of produce bags distributed weekly to more than 1,500. About 800 are distributed to local nonprofits, senior centers



People load groceries into the trunk of a drive-thru customer of Facebook's mobile farmers market, which has expanded rapidly since the pandemic began. Courtesy Facebook.

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and churches, and 730 are provided at a heavily subsidized rate directly to local families. Before the pandemic, the program was distributing about 200 subsidized grocery bags to local families.

Supplies come from local farms, restaurants and vendors, according to Dena Grimm, Facebook's manager of community outreach and events in the Bay Area.

The program also purchases specialty products in addition to produce from restaurants to better support them right now, added Chloe Meyere, a Facebook spokesperson.

For instance, a recent grocery bag available for people to preorder online for \$10 contained locally sourced free-range eggs, banana walnut bread, organic orange juice, butter, granola, whole beans and honey.

Generally, the subsidized bags represent about half of the overall distributions each week and provide a \$60 value at a cost of between \$10 and \$15, Meyere added. Eligible customers can pay that cost with CalFresh EBT benefits.

The products are high-quality and recipients are thrilled, Grimm said.

"We are so happy we're able to do it," she said. "We're thankful we have the opportunity to give back."

Since the shelter-in-place orders began, the initiative has resulted in a total donation of about 4,000 food bags, Meyere said. To date, Facebook has spent around \$3.5 to \$4 million on monetary contributions, the mobile market and other efforts to promote food stability locally, she added.

They're planning to keep the program running through the end of the year, Grimm said, as food security continues to be a concern. They aim to donate about 31,000 bags and provide about 29,000 subsidized bags of produce through the end of the year to serve about 800 families, according to Meyere.

The food bags are distributed two ways - through local nonprofits and at a drive-thru or walk-up mobile market system.

In many cases, Facebook provides the grocery bags for nonprofits and community service organizations to give to their clients. These organizations include the senior centers in Belle Haven and East Palo Alto, LifeMoves, St. Vincent de Paul, Generations United, All Five Preschool, and several local churches, according to Meyere.

About 115 of those bags each week have gone to families being sheltered by LifeMoves, a homeless services provider based in Menlo Park. That housing includes kitchen space, which families use to prepare the groceries that Facebook provides, said Samantha Peterson, LifeMoves spokesperson.

The donations mean the families don't "have to worry about one of the most basic needs," she said.

"This food helps our families shelter in place as they work hard to return to stable housing. We are really grateful to Facebook for being so generous in providing these groceries," added LifeMoves CEO Bruce Ives in a written statement.

Facebook has also set up drive-thru mobile markets where customers can pick up grocery bags contact-free.

People can arrange what they want online and order their produce bags for pickup. Access the market's offerings online [here](#).

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