

# Topeka Rescue Mission Ministries OPERATION FOOD SECURE Program Report | September 2021

Operation Food Secure (OFS) began with the USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program, a COVID-19 relief effort that purchased surplus food products from farmers and redistributed them to nonprofits.

The Topeka Rescue Mission developed the program in May 2020, using a partner distribution model to deliver food "the last mile," into neighborhoods and communities across ten Kansas counties. OFS leveraged a powerful network of 117 churches, tribes, neighborhood associations, nonprofits, and other civic groups to distribute boxes of fresh, healthy food to those in need in the community.

OFS stretched federal resources by targeting identified food deserts, where individuals have little to no access to grocery stores or other food relief sources. For example, most rural communities are considered food deserts and face higher rates of food insecurity than their urban counterparts. OFS established dozens of sites in rural communities across a ten-county region.

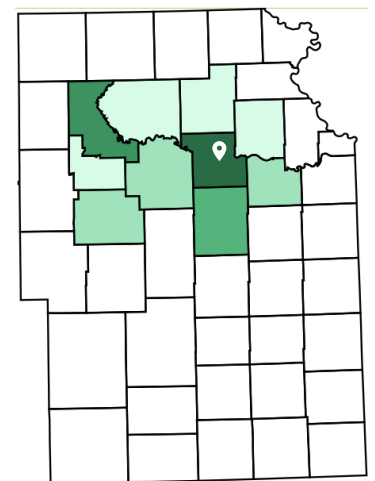
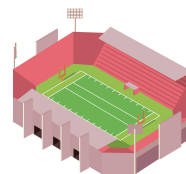
The OFS team discovered this effort was about much more than a box of food. By training our volunteers to develop a trust-based relationship with those they served, the food boxes became a catalyst to strengthen communities, provide holistic resources, and sow seeds of hope.

**133,283**  
nutritious food boxes, or

**4 million pounds**  
of food and milk to

**110,123 Kansans**  
in 10 counties

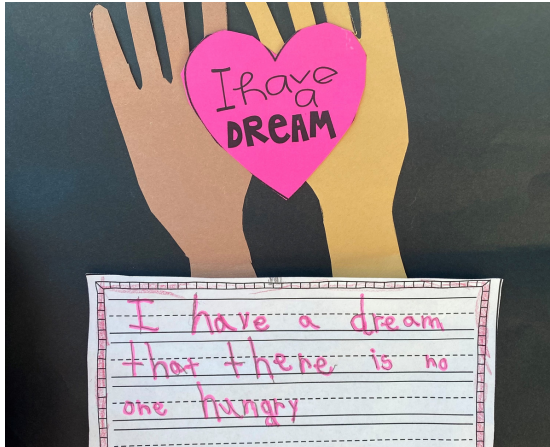
...enough to fill  
**Arrowhead Stadium**  
1.5 times!



*Boxes per 1,000 Persons by County.  
Counties Served: Douglas, Geary,  
Jackson, Jefferson, Morris, Osage,  
Pottawatomie, Riley, Shawnee,  
Wabaunsee.*

Jackson County, Kansas

## Our Stories



### DANNY RILEY COUNTY

Danny, age 7, lives in a mobile home park in Manhattan, where OFS volunteers deliver food boxes door-to-door. The young boy was asked to write a letter for a school project with the prompt, "If you could do anything, what would it be?" His response was, "If I could do anything, I would have the food box fairy go to everyone's home because when I'm hungry she always brings food. That way, no one will have to be hungry."

### BRETT SHAWNEE COUNTY

"Today, one of our food box recipients thanked us for the food and said we could take him off the list. His finances had stabilized, and over the last couple of deliveries, he had been taking the food to his co-workers who needed food. For those who are skeptical of this being a program that makes people dependent, here's a great story of a senior who needed the food for a time, shared what he didn't need, and then asked to be taken off the list so someone else could receive the food."



### TRACY CITIZEN POTAWATOMI NATION

"It warmed my heart to be able to give to our tribal members in need each week. They were so happy and thankful for the needed food. Our tribal council was very supportive and funded a refrigerated truck to get the food boxes and milk from Topeka to Rossville. A local company in Rossville supplied a forklift to unload the pallets when the truck arrived. Our local 4H chapter kids helped with the distribution. This was a community effort and we could not have done it without everyone involved."





# What We've Learned

Operation Food Secure served families facing acute hunger due to the pandemic, as well as those already experiencing chronic food insecurity. Here's what we've learned about the benefits of providing fresh, nutritious foods to families in need, through our participation in the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program:

## **Creates a pathway to healthy relationships and wraparound services.**

Food insecurity is often a symptom of larger root causes; nutritious food can serve as a conduit for wraparound care. Our program provided resources, social capital (safe and caring relationships), and helped families make strides towards long-term stability.

## **Removes barriers for food-insecure families facing complex challenges.**

There is no "one size fits all" approach to hunger. Addressing food insecurity requires a multi-faceted approach for the many families that fall through the cracks of traditional assistance. OFS provided food for households who: didn't meet income qualifications, live in food deserts, are without reliable transportation, do not have documentation or are unsheltered, have children in non-parental care, face increasing food costs, only need short-term assistance, cannot afford to take off work and wait in line at drive-through food distributions, or feel stigma and shame in enrolling in public assistance.

## **Engages the community, changing the cultural narrative around hunger.**

Our 535 volunteers had a preconceived understanding of what hunger looks like in our region. Our program provided exposure, training, and education, changing hearts and minds and encouraging new conversations around food insecurity. One of our volunteers said, "Though I was already aware of how prevalent hunger is, OFS helped bring it to reality. This is about so much more than just fulfilling a physical need. It is caring for a human being -- caring that they are hungry, but also caring for their soul and recognizing more than just the external needs."

## **Tackles nutritional disparities of low-income Americans.**

The last year brutally demonstrated the human cost of poor nutrition. Low-income households are often forced to choose between healthy foods and simply having enough to feed their family. Many suffer from diet-related chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Providing nutritious foods is a strategic and preventative way to reduce the risk of future medical complications and costs.





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