

St. Francis Seraph Ministries (SFSM) is located in the heart of Over the Rhine (OTR) with a mission to nurture and nourish people in need. SFSM addresses the social determinant of health of food insecurity. The population SFSM serves is predominantly composed of low-income individuals. Evidence shows that low-income status may lead to food insecurity and that food insecurity can exacerbate poverty. While they serve the community in many ways, the largest aspect of SFSM is the food service, distributing approximately 350 meals daily and 84,291 meals annually¹. Resources for SFSM arise from Amazon wish lists, Kroger Community Rewards, in-person donations, and many volunteers. Funding mainly comes from foundations, grants, and donors.

Hamilton county food insecurity rates improved during COVID. In 2019, 12.8% of the population in Hamilton County experienced food insecurity, which decreased to 12.5% and 10.9% in 2020 and 2021, respectively². These changes are likely due to increased government funding during the pandemic and the 2019 addition of a grocery store in OTR.

Since SFSM heavily relied on volunteers and in-person services, they had to quickly make a transition during the pandemic that would allow them to continue safely serving the community. One way they did this was by providing lunches to-go. Although COVID halted many of their consistent food donations, members of the community stepped up and some organizations started donating to SFSM as a way to help during the pandemic. Now that inflation has increased, these donations have slowed. Unfortunately, many clients of SFSM were unable to obtain the stimulus check meant to spur economic activity during this period of inflation; SFSM has partnered with United Way to connect those eligible with their stimulus checks.

Another concern for SFSM is accessibility to their site. From the period between 2002-2015, OTR has lost 73% of housing units considered “affordable” (3,235 units to 869 units)³. As OTR becomes more gentrified, the clientele is being distanced from SFSM, with 58% of clients having a commute of over 15 minutes and 33% of clients requiring a form of transportation other than walking⁴.

When our project began in Fall 2022, SFSM’s executive director Mary Pat Raupach, introduced us to what used to be a very busy and packed St. Anthony Center. Many programs had been slowed down since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dining room at SFSM was closed for 5 months, from March 2020 to November 2020, but during that time SFSM never stopped serving food.

SFSM has always been a place of socialization. While this is not their primary goal, SFSM fosters a place for positive social interactions that their clients may otherwise not have. As we all know, socialization was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. With table

capacity limits, mask requirements, and extensive sterilization, precautions were taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 and create a safe area for clients to interact. Even when take-out meals were the only option, many clients chose to eat their meals outside together.

Per Mary Pat, the volume of clients served decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, as some individuals experiencing homelessness were offered shelters in hotels. Some of these hotels were located further away from OTR and clients chose to visit soup kitchens closer to their shelters. Mary Pat reported that SFSM has seen a significant increase in meals provided since January 2023. To give a concrete example, Mary Pat shared that the total number of meals served in July 2023 was double the number of meals served in July 2022. SFSM is seeing the number of meals served return to pre-pandemic numbers.

Financial pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic and thereafter caused hardship for SFSM and other charitable institutions. Food prices increased by 9.9 percent in 2022 and are predicted to rise by 6 percent in 2023, a marker of rising inflation.⁵ SFSM leadership attests to rising costs from inflation and an increased meals served. Continued support from partner organizations helps to offset rising costs.

We researched individuals who hold leadership positions in the city of Cincinnati and Hamilton county and found many ways to contact officials to advocate for social change. Other platforms to advocate for social change include city council meetings, contacting the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners, and contacting state representatives for our congressional district (1st).

We also met with representatives from our community partner to learn about existing grants through local and national government as well as current contacts in the government. We learned that local funding became available for SFSM during the COVID-19 pandemic but individual donors are the major support system for the programs SFSM offers.

In addition to our community partner SFSM, we would like to advocate for other food banks in OTR including Our Daily Bread, Tsa Emergency Pantry, Over the Rhine Soup Kitchen, Prince of Peace, Freestore Foodbank, and Society of Saint Vincent Depaul - Choice Food Pantry.⁶ Additional funding and staffing would be helpful for all of these agencies in helping them to better support their clients.

A question that will likely arise when we are advocating for additional funding/resources for SFSM and other food banks in the OTR community will be: what would the additional funding/resources be used for? We gained much of the information to answer this question from the survey of SFSM's clients which we conducted in February of this year. Common concerns of community members included: housing insecurity, need for more social services in general, transportation, health insurance, and assistance with access to prescription

medication.⁴ In our conversations with SFSM, we learned that they (plus other OTR agencies) are interested in addressing these needs of community members but lack the funding to do so. This makes a compelling case in our efforts for advocacy.

References:

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