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Coronavirus Florida: A Jupiter nonprofit is buying and delivering food for seniors so they don't have to

By Sam Howard

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Coronavirus Palm Beach County updates: The Pearl Mae Foundation in Jupiter is dropping off bags filled with one week's worth of non-perishable foods, fruit, meat and household items to local senior citizens.

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JUPITER — A non-profit already in the business of helping senior citizens in need has hatched a plan to assist them during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Pearl Mae Foundation, based on Indiantown Road, started a new initiative this week called Pearl's Pantry. The foundation is dropping off bags filled with one week's worth of non-perishable foods, fruit, meat and household items to local seniors.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says those 65 years old and above are at a higher risk of suffering from a severe illness related to the coronavirus. It urges those adults to stay home as much as possible.

“Being a senior citizen, they’re warning us not to go to the grocery. ... It was lovely to have someone come by,” said Elaine Holtsberg, an 80-year-old Jupiter resident who received veggies, meat and other items for herself and her 93-year-old husband, Jack, this week.

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The foundation is paying for the supplies through a fundraiser it’s running on Facebook. Some \$3,200 had been raised by midday Friday.

The foundation says it can feed a senior for a week with \$25. Volunteer Michelle Hood, who lives in Stuart, said the foundation has worked with Country Club Produce in Martin County to maximize the \$25 budget, while BJ’s Wholesale in unincorporated Jensen Beach donated a gift card. A similar partnership is in the works with Publix, she added.

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So far, the foundation has dropped off bags to a handful of seniors, Hood said Friday morning.

Executive director Lauren Sullivan said the goal is to serve at least 100. She dropped off the food for Holtsberg earlier this week.

Well before the current pandemic, The Pearl Mae Foundation made helping local senior citizens its chief aim.

The organization provides those in financial need with grants up to \$500 so they can pay for well-being expenses. The non-profit has also awarded tens of thousands of dollars in scholarships to local high school seniors and graduate students pursuing healthcare-related careers. The thinking is that the new professionals will be those taking care of a growing population of senior citizens.

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Typically the grants cover expenses that are medical-related, like footing a co-pay or buying a wheelchair, Sullivan said.

But the coronavirus pandemic created another need for many, Sullivan said. It was the simple act of buying food.

“We realized that right now the major need is food and supplies,” Sullivan said. “So why not just start a program specifically for food and supplies for seniors now?”

Volunteers are taking precautions to keep seniors and themselves safe, Sullivan said. They’re handling the food with gloves, calling ahead so recipients know they’re on their way and dropping off bags outside.

The seniors are “overwhelmed that someone out there cares for them,” Hood said, adding that some ask her to stick around and chat — from a safe distance.

Anyone interested in volunteering can contact the foundation through its website. Those who live between Palm Beach Gardens and Stuart and need assistance getting food can fill out a form on the foundation’s website to take part in the program.

“Food is a temporary thing but a friendship lasts forever,” Hood said. “I’m trying not to tear up because its a blessing for myself but it’s a blessing for them, too.”

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