I think we can all say “What a year it’s been”! Most of us have had to make changes in many of the things we do. Ruth’s Harvest-Fairfield (RH-F) has been no different. With the onset of COVID-19, RH-F had to make a number of interesting and sometimes challenging adjustments in order to provide the weekend meals to students in the Fairfield Area School District (FASD) who were food insecure. We took many extra precautions in packing the bags including limiting the numbers of individuals within the packing facility, requiring the wearing of masks and providing gloves and hand sanitizer for the volunteers.

When school closed to in-person classes as a result of the pandemic, we changed from providing the 7 weekend meals (and snacks) in backpacks to packing the food in paper and plastic grocery bags. We initially provided the bags to the school for distribution with their ongoing lunch program. As circumstances continued to evolve last school year, we moved the distribution of the bags to St. John working alongside the Fairfield “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” effort. We were able to continue distribution of the bags until the end of June, a few weeks past the normal school year, thanks to the ongoing generous support of our many donors both within the St. John family and the Fairfield community. The outpouring of support to those in need was both humbling and inspiring.

With the start of the 2020-2021 school year (and our 6th year of operation), RH-F is gearing up to continue our efforts to provide nutritious food to those students in need while also continuing to meet COVID-19 safety and health requirements. We will continue to pack with small groups to assure appropriate social distancing within the packing room. Masks will be required and gloves and hand sanitizer will also be available. Additionally, from lessons learned during the spring session of school, we will continue to use plastic bags to contain the food. Using “single-use” heavy weight plastic bags is safer for RH-F volunteers as the “single-use” bags will not require cleaning each week as we did for the backpacks. Last year, we packed using both a paper bag and then a plastic bag to allow for easier handling by the students. This year we will be using heavy weight plastic bags (with handles) from the Gettysburg Kennies Market. They have volunteered to donate a case of bags, after which we will purchase the bags from Kennies at their cost. We are indeed fortunate to have this support from Kennies as this will enable us to eliminate the use of the paper bag (which somehow always seemed to tear), and will allow RH-F to address future needs for bags.

As you probably already know, FASD is using an alternative schedule for in-person classroom learning, at least for the first semester of the school year. One group of students attends in-person classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays while another group attends on Wednesdays and Fridays. When students are not in school, they will be learning remotely via technology such as a computer. This means there are several days when students are not physically in school. While a special grant has enabled FASD to provide free lunches in some form to all students Tuesday through Friday, this leaves at least one additional day (Monday) when students are at home. As such RH-F is expanding our support of food insecure students to include an additional 3 meals and a snack. Each bag of food will weigh approximately 8 pounds. RH-F hopes to be able to provide these extra meals as long as the two day in-person class schedule continues.

We would like to thank all of you who have so generously supported RH-F in past years and hope you will be in a position to continue this generous support of Fairfield students during this school year. While COVID-19 has presented new challenges to all of us, RH-F continues to adapt to safety and health requirements and provide nutritious meals to food insecure students while letting them know the greater Fairfield community cares for them and about their wellbeing.