

High Tide
Finding Refuge
on the First Coast

Front Door
The Gabriel House
of Care

Heart & Soul
Brushed Bold:
A Collaboration of
Heart and Soul

First Impression
Positively Pink

Fresh Local Flavor
Nourishment Network

First Coast

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For the love of Florida's First Coast and its people.

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ISSUE

Giving Thanks & Giving Back

A celebration of generosity and goodwill





Nourishment NETWORK

Solving hunger takes a community

By Caren Burmeister | Photography by Maggie FitzRoy

About 500 adults, many of them toting children and suitcases on wheels, stand several hours in a line outside St. Matthew's Lutheran Church for food that will feed their families for weeks. Dozens of cars queue up at the church's carport, where volunteers pass cardboard cases of yogurt and frozen chicken quarters to people in the vehicles.

It's the first day of fall, and the volunteers' shirts are soaked with sweat. One grateful woman compliments the luscious cucumbers, squash and eggplant as she slips them in her tote bag.

A man nearby says, "God bless you all," for a bag of hamburger buns.

By all accounts the recent food distribution at the church on Merrill Road is enormous. Yet, it's no comparison to one held several days earlier that fed 1,500 families, says Frank Ormonde, chief operating officer of Farm Share Inc., the largest independent nonprofit food bank program in Florida.

"At every one we've had to turn people away," Ormonde says. "To solve hunger it takes a community. In 2014, no one in our community should be hungry."

Farm Share collaborates with Nourishment Network, a hunger relief program run by Lutheran Social Services in Jacksonville, to rescue and distribute fresh, nutritious fruits and vegetables that would otherwise be thrown away. It delivers the food through mass distributions and member churches and shelters.

Farm Share expects to distribute 11 million pounds of fresh produce to feed people dealing with food insecurity in

Left: Christopher Newton, 6, and his sister Christina, 5, are all smiles as they wait in line at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church for food.

Above: A line of people waiting for fresh food winds around St. Matthew's Lutheran Church.

The largest source of donated produce is Blue Sky Farms, a 733-acre farm in Elkton, about 20 miles southwest of St. Augustine.



Danny Johns of Blue Sky Farms stands in a field of tilled soil.

Northeast Florida. That doesn't include meat, dairy and other food stuffs made available by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The food has touched many hands by the time it reaches those people standing in line. Ormonde is a whiz at logistics, having retired from the U.S. Navy in 2013 as a lieutenant commander overseeing aviation and operational safety training programs. Now, he coordinates 9,000 volunteers and he knows they deserve praise.

"We couldn't do it without the volunteers," Ormonde says. "They really make it happen."

The largest source of donated produce is Blue Sky Farms, a 733-acre farm in Elkton, about 20 miles southwest of St. Augustine. Its owner, Danny Johns, started working with Farm Share in April after building a trusting relationship that involves daily pickups.

"We're not just a corporate farm, but a farm trying to give back to the community," says Johns, a fourth-generation farmer. "We hate to see anything go to waste. Throwing away food and the fruits of our labor goes against our grain."

Most farm-donated produce is a "second," which means it's not the perfect

size, color or shape to be sold in a grocery store. But you'd never know that by the big, colorful zucchini, eggplant and cucumbers given out at the church.

With partner farms across the state, Farm Share also has bargaining power. That means it can trade fruits and vegetables when there's an excess or deficiency of crops. For example, if local farms donate more potatoes than Farm Share can handle, it might trade them for avocados from South Florida.

When the farm calls, Farm Share dispatches one of its trucks to collect the produce and bring it to the warehouse on Jesse Street in downtown Jacksonville. If no truck is available they will hire one, Ormonde says. The 30,000-square-foot warehouse has a cooler big enough for 42 pallets and a large freezer that can accommodate 92 pallets, such as the frozen chicken from the USDA.

Farm Share volunteers sort through the produce to ensure it's edible, then bag it or put it in the huge bins destined for the distribution events. Within one to three days, all the food is distributed to the needy.

"Our warehouse is pretty empty and the reason is we don't store food," Ormonde says. "We've trained staff that we're not in the business of storing food."

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Top: Potatoes in a storage facility at Blue Sky Farms. **Middle:** Farm Share chief operating officer Frank Ormonde, right, hands a box of food to James Strock, left, and his wife Crystal Craven during a distribution at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church. **Bottom:** Workers plow a field at Blue Sky Farms.