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United Credit Union

United Credit Union Is At The Heart of The Southwest Collective's *Food's Here* Program Aimed At Curbing Food Insecurity

Grassroots Coalition of Big-Hearted Non-Profits, Philanthropic Food Distributors, Flexible Restaurant Owners and Staff, and Enthusiastic Volunteers Re-Distribute Surplus Food and Boost Neighborhood Pride For Thousands of Southwest Families

(Chicago, IL April 30, 2021) Since its inception in 1931, United Credit Union has been emphasizing the industry's "People Helping People" mission by serving its members throughout the southwest neighborhoods and the greater Chicagoland area with friendly, personalized service and [money-saving financial products](#). Now, as part of its 90th Anniversary Celebration, the community-chartered non-profit headquartered at 4444 S. Pulaski Road in Chicago's Archer Heights neighborhood is also proud to serve as the central distribution point for an extremely popular Tuesday-night free food giveaway program called [Food's Here](#).

"The core effort of the *Food's Here* program is to deliver boxes of mainstay food items along with ready-to-eat restaurant quality meals that alleviate hunger and boost families' spirits that very same day," explained United Credit Union's CEO Mario Aguirre. "But *Food's Here* reaches deeper by mobilizing the community to combat the long-term issue of hunger on Chicago's southwest side. It's about putting restaurant employees and other food providers who have been out of work due to restaurant closings and pandemic service restrictions back to work and giving them a chance to be a part of a vital community effort."

Mobilizing The Community To Combat Food Insecurity

Recognizing that, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 20% of Chicago's southwest side residents had been living below the poverty level (source: [2019 American Community](#)

[Survey](#)), a fast-growing grassroots coalition known as The Southwest Collective worked quickly and diligently to help fight food insecurity for thousands of area residents with the *Food's Here* program. “As things continued to worsen at the top of 2021, we devised *Food's Here* to provide some measure of assistance to our community in these tough times,” said Jaime Groth-Searle, President/Founder of The Southwest Collective. “We teamed with organizations like United Credit Union to arrange Pop-up locations where people can either drive up or walk up and get a box of food. We soon realized, however, that simply offering boxes of groceries each week, while helpful, wasn't enough. We had to do more to stimulate the local economy, too. *Food's Here* drastically reduces food waste by re-distributing food to those in need. It also employs local restaurant crews to plate the food into individual servings at a rate greater than \$15/hour.”

Every detail of the program aims at keeping local residents and area businesses healthy: weekly food distribution events and support along with initial seed funding totaling \$3,000 has been provided by United Credit Union on 45th & Pulaski, food crews from local restaurants have all played a role in prepping, portioning and re-packaging surplus food into ready-to-use meals people can take home and feel good about serving to their families.

Awesome Community Reaction Makes Rewarding Experience For All

Community response to *Food's Here* has been both surprising and gratifying for all involved. “People come through with the music playing, their smiling kids in car seats and their dogs hanging out the windows, there's no way that's not going to put a smile on your face,” shared SW Collective's Groth-Searle. Then there are the “Señoras”, the older women who are so nice and they dote on everyone at the food giveaway. “When they say ‘Thank you’ and ‘God Bless You’, it's so nice and it just makes it worthwhile.”

One *Food's Here* recipient who will always stand out in the mind of United CU's CEO Aguirre is Natalie, a single mom who lives nearby their main Archer Heights branch where the events are held. He was surprised, but also very happy to receive a voicemail message from her thanking him and his staff for hosting the *Food's Here* events. After calling her back to let her know how much he appreciated her message, she agreed to let him share her voicemail with his staff and the public too. According to Natalie, “I'm a single mother with three children and we were coming home on a Tuesday night around 5:00PM. I literally had \$13 in my wallet because we're going through some really hard times right now. That's when I came around the corner and saw them distributing free food boxes at United Credit Union. So I pulled over and they were so friendly, so non-judgmental and just eager to

help. It was because of them that I was able to feed my kids that night. Now we go back every Tuesday and it's so easy because you're in the car, you have the music on and all you have to do is be patient, which is great. That's why I took the time to call and just say thank you so very much."

No Judgments, No Registration Required, No Strings Attached

It's important to note the *Food's Here* team doesn't judge or make people register to get food. They don't ask them for names or demographic data, but do have information available about financial programs provided by the credit union, as well as rental relief, healthcare and more. Instead of taking a hard sell approach to marketing at these events, United CU relies on their neighborly appeal, along with a few signs inviting those in the southwest community who are under-banked (less familiar with their banking choices) or less privileged (and therefore may not have access to money saving options) to consider looking into the advantages of credit union membership.

"When people begin to learn what a credit union has to offer, it's not a hard sell. The second they realize we are a community-based financial institution so anyone who lives, works or worships in the city of Chicago can become a member, they are very interested." Aguirre explained. "From a consumer perspective, people love that we offer free checking with no minimum balance required."

According to Aguirre, hosting the *Food's Here* distribution is a very rewarding experience, and it's something they are compelled to do. "While there are certainly challenging moments that come along, at the end of the day you feel accomplished and certainly rewarded," He said. "That's really what we as a credit union are here to do. It's part of our mission to be active in the community so helping to reduce food insecurity and hunger in our community goes hand in hand with other services,"

The credit union movement began with the idea that non-profit financial institutions should play an important role in helping people live a better, happier, more successful life. It makes sense that families struggling to get the basic necessities, are going to be struggling on the financial side as well. "Once we start talking about comparing the differences between credit unions vs. banks, they are surprised as to why they have never heard about the benefits of a credit union and why didn't they take advantage of a credit union sooner."

About United Credit Union

Founded in 1931 by a group of Chicago Teachers, United Credit Union is a non-for-profit financial cooperative serving more than 19,000 members with \$255 million in assets. Any individual who lives,

works or worships in Cook County, IL is eligible to become a member. United Credit Union offers checking, savings, personal loans, credit cards mortgage loans, auto loans, and a wide range of other financial services. For over 90 Years, United CU's mission has been to serve as a "Financial Partner for Life" by providing a full range of competitive financial products and services in an environment of extraordinary service. For more information, visit www.unitedcreditunion.com.

About The Southwest Collective

The mission of The Southwest Collective is to provide an open forum for southwest side residents to voice their concerns; hear new perspectives from their neighbors; learn about existing public resources; and launch economic, educational, and recreational initiatives that bring communities together. To make a donation or learn more, reach out to info@swcollective.org.

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