Jason Ilstrup 0:02

Welcome to the Downtown Down-Low virtual podcast where we hear from our members about what's new and happening downtown. This podcast is brought to you by the law firm of Carlson Black O'Callahan and Battenberg in downtown Madison. Carlson Black specializes in real estate, business and tax law. Carlson Black is proud to represent many DMI members in helping to build a vibrant and inclusive downtown. Today's guest is Charles McLimans, the President and CEO of the River Food Pantry, an organization using food, resources and faith to build a stronger community.

Charles, how are you?

Charles McLimans 0:42

Hi, Jason. Hi, friends. Good to see everybody virtually.

Jason Ilstrup 0:47

Well, welcome. You are the first ever guest on our first video podcast. Is that up vodcast? video podcast? I don't know, what do you call that Charles?

Charles McLimans 0:56

It could be a podcast if you're drinking vodka . But I think it's just a video podcast so...

Jason Ilstrup 1:02

Well, as you can see from the sun above us it is the morning when we're taping. Charles, first and foremost, how are you doing? How are you holding up? Your family healthy? Doing well?

Charles McLimans 1:13

You know, doing well. You know, it's continuing to, to go in for those of us who are essential workers, you know, going in, still on a daily basis. And, my partner is as well, a healthcare professional and so, we're blessed and, you know, keeping safe and doing everything that we can to keep the people that are around us safe as well. so thankful for that.

Jason Ilstrup 1:43

We're so thankful for the work you're doing and you know, same here, we're feeling very privileged to have our health my family's health and we're privileged to be able to have conversations with community leaders like you. The first question is how has COVID-19 effected The River Food Pantry?

Charles McLimans 2:00

Yeah. So, you know, when we saw the University of Wisconsin closing down, we knew that it was, you know, starting to get really serious, we put our first level of contingency plans in place. I mean, we had contingency plans in place before for the, you know, Snowmageddon. You know, all of the polar vertices that we were having the year before. So we kind of had a little bit of a game plan going from that. But then, shortly thereafter, when we heard you know, Madison Metropolitan School districts were, were closing down, that's when our next level of contingency went into place. And so, first level, we stopped all of our hot meals, our hot meal program, and our clothing and household program, just to limit the number of people coming in. And then we were only limiting at first having 25 people at a time come into shop. The second level that continues now, is that we went to curbside grocery delivery service and so whether it's drive up walk up, but using boxes and supplementing those boxes getting that food out. Our mobile lunch program, MUNCH, that stands for Madison Unites to Nourish Children at Home, continues to operate in nine high needs Northside neighborhoods. So we're out six days a week delivering mobile lunch to kids who are out of school and and their families and so we're doing between 200 to we had up to 450 lunches one day delivering them and normally that consists of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a meat and cheese sandwich. Our regular MUNCH coordinator is a in a high risk group and so she has she's staying at home and working from home doing admin work for us. But our chef we have a we have a wonderful full time chef. Chef Chris actually took over that program and his been doing a lot of innovative things for the kids like chicken wings and fresh carrots this past week that went out trying to do he did bacon cheeseburgers last week, we've collaborated with Ian's pizza to deliver pizza to the kids. So just trying to give them, keeping it fun and getting some good food to them. So we also limited the number of volunteers that we could use on site we asked our volunteers age 60 and up to just take a break for now. And as you can imagine, a lot of our really core supporters who provide a lot of service for us on a daily weekly basis do fit in that group. But we've been encouraging, younger, healthy volunteers who are not in a high risk group to sign up and people can sign up via our website directly at riverfoodpantry.org and see the opportunities both for our MUNCH program and for helping with our grocery distribution on site. We do have slots open for that. And then of course, we established right away a COVID-19 emergency food fund, and have been accepting donations for that. I was on a call with a bunch of providers across the city, from the, from the city to the county, to the food banks to all of the other major food pantries that we have a weekly standing call school district is on that. And United Way 211 was on that as well. And United Way 211 is kind of a central resource for people to go and get ask for assistance, but whatever that may be, whether it's food or shelter, or clothing or mental health services, but they said in the past month, 60% of their calls are food related. And so we know that, you know, unprecedented numbers of people that are unemployed, unprecedented numbers of people who have never needed or had to look for a food pantry before are seeking that out. Stimulus checks didn't start arriving until last week. And so number of people were just trying to navigate a system that they were very unfamiliar with.

Jason Ilstrup 6:24

One conversation I had with the great Renee Moe, Executive Director and CEO of United Way, she told me that 300% increase in 211 calls and the vast majority just as you said, 60% of those calls, were having questions about food, how has it affected the river food pantry and the whole network? You must be seeing much higher numbers.

Charles McLimans 6:49

Yeah, the entire emergency food system, i'm sure you guys have been, you know, seeing the reports. It is happening and so it's we've all been experiencing a about a four fold increase. On a normal busy month, and we always have, we always seem to be busy. But we normally have about 150 new people enrolling for the first time for our services. That has quadrupled over the over the past month. But again over the past month, thanks to our very generous supporters, we were able to distribute over 300,000 pounds of emergency food to about 2000 individual households. So the community continues to step up and to be generous, you know, United Way is doing a great job. Second Harvest and CAC, the Community Action Coalition, the two food banks in our community are just doing a tremendous amount of work. And there's a really great collaboration that is going on throughout our community that we're seeing just everybody working together and sharing resources and just responding. We have volunteers a number of people, as you can imagine are homebound. We have a partnership with Newbridge called Food Bridge that was started last fall. And it is designed for homebound seniors, older adults aged 60 and up who are at 150% of the federal poverty level. That is that they receive $18,000 a year or less of gross income. That was originally supposed to be a pilot project that would accommodate up to 70 households in one year. And we've seen that almost triple since this has begun. Clearly we don't want older adults who are in a highly vulnerable population to go out of their house. But a lot of people are just scared to go out they have other health issues, why they can't go out and so we've had a lot of volunteers stepping up and doing delivery services, there's a group that is working on trying to develop a network of delivery services that could that anybody could call. We're helping them to pilot it for a vulnerable population, but that you need groceries, you need food from a restaurant, they're trying to set this up and take it network wide. So there's a lot of innovation going on right now and a lot of collaboration. So it's great to see our community coming together to make this happen.

Jason Ilstrup 9:36

I think that's a really important point. The next question I have is: it's a very, very difficult situation, right? The numbers that you're giving us, this is you know, people are in very difficult times and you are doing a great job of providing services. So what are the good things that have come out of this reorganization and for the community? That sounds like more people are volunteering more people are giving, but what are those innovations? What are those good things that you've seen come out of this crisis?

Charles McLimans 10:02

Yeah. And that's, that's what really keeps me motivated, you know. I turn the news off, right? Because it's, uh, you know, you can read it but just to see that constant cycle is pretty, pretty depressing but I have, you know, i'm the blessed every day to just see selfless service and sacrifice from so many people. Part of our staff, you know those who can, working from home to keep them safe. But a lot of our people are on the front lines on a daily basis just have continued to do a tremendous job. So from my own team, and our team includes of course volunteers. We do have volunteers coming in on a daily basis that really inspire me. Just hearing the gratitude from our community members when we are out there. They they just say You know, Thank God you're here. And just staying connected with our, with our donors and volunteers, you know, we get a lot of comments. When somebody donates online, they have the ability to leave a comment and just really powerful comments of support from our community and demonstrations of support from our community. And then, as I mentioned, people collaborating and working together not in competition, that is just a true spirit of collaboration and of community service and of selflessness. And so they're really bright spots. You know, we have a number of our businesses that have like some of the larger businesses, like Exact Sciences and and Epic that have returned operations to continue to, you know, respond and help with this crisis. And then, you know, all of our health care professionals and emergency workers that are also doing a tremendous sacrifice. So those are all bright spots. And all of us learning to stay connected while staying apart and having the technology to do that is also a great blessing.

Jason Ilstrup 12:23

Well, I would be remiss not to say thank you for the work that you're doing. And I think you're absolutely right, the community is coming together. And I'm hoping that these good parts of the community we're seeing will help with that restarting and reimagining so we create a better world for everyone. And so we are taking care of all members of our community. And Charles, i've known you for years. You are someone that has always lived by that.

Charles McLimans 12:46

Thank you, Jason.

Jason Ilstrup 12:48

I absolutely want to know how can DMI and how can the DMI members help right now? What resources? Are there virtual volunteering opportunities, regular volunteering opportunities, resources that our members can help provide and how did how can they do that?

Charles McLimans 13:03

Yeah, that's a great question and you know, as a proud DMI member I really appreciate, number one, the support that we get all the members get from DMI, thank you for providing this opportunity to share our message. I would say go to our website riverfoodpantry.org There is a wealth of resources there on how to sign up for volunteers, individuals can go on there and sign up for volunteers through our website to see the slots that are open. Our Facebook page. We keep that really updated. We have a great communications person we feed a lot of content so there are videos if you want to see what are they doing, you can actually go on and see videos of what's going into the boxes and how it's going out. So for people who are willing and wanting to go out who are not in a high risk group, they can sign up as individual volunteers for our mobile lunch program. We know that some companies are doing this, we're not asking for donations right now from individuals to bring them in. It's like having somebody bring them from their home. But some companies are doing a food drive or personal care essentials or cleaning products. They could do that. For virtual, some people are making masks. So we've had a number of people bring in homemade masks that we can use for our staff volunteers, if we have any extra we're giving them out to our clients as well. Other ways that anybody can volunteer virtually is by being an ambassador for us. Going on online and and following us on social media. And if you like what we do, amplify that effect and send that out to your network and to say, hey, this is an organization that is doing great work and supporting. There's many of us, as I mentioned, that are in the community doing that, but to help amplify, you know, our voice is really important. So, yeah, and you know, of course prayers.

Jason Ilstrup 15:17

Absolutely. We were sending prayers, our positive energy, our good karma your way for all the great work you do. Charles, we cannot thank you enough. Today's guest on the Downtown Down-Low has been Charles McLimans, the President and CEO of the River Food Pantry. Thank you so much for being here today and for all your hard work.

Charles McLimans 15:35

Thanks guys, appreciate it.

Jason Ilstrup 15:36

Thank you as well to our sponsor, Carlson Black O'Callahan and Battenberg, a law firm in downtown Madison doing everything they can to make downtown Madison inclusive for our whole community. Hope you join us soon for our next video podcast. Have a good day and we will see you soon.