Cold Storage Trailer Host: Key to Karma, Inc.

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Union Bethel) is both a place of worship and a food pantry that serves the community through bi-weekly food distributions at their campuses in Brandywine and Temple Hills. Led by Senior Pastor Reverend William Campbell Jr, the Church seeks to support their community and meet its needs. To expand food assistance services at the church's Brandywine location, Union Bethel became a host site for one of the three Washington Gas funded cold storage trailers. Union Bethel's trailer is operated by Key to Karma, Inc. a non-profit organization that seeks to extend opportunities for service back into the community. Key to Karma conducts food distributions, laundry drives, supports families experiencing food insecurity due to frequent health complications, and creates food access opportunities for nutritionally insecure schoolchildren.

Union Bethel and Key to Karma are working with a network of local food assistance partners in the southern part of the county, an area that experiences high rates of food insecurity and limited access to affordable healthy food. The installation of the cold storage trailer has allowed Key to Karma a new opportunity to strengthen its local network of food assistance partners by providing invaluable space to store perishable goods. Now that smaller organizations can access this additional cold storage infrastructure, participating partners have greater capacity to order larger quantities of perishable items for distribution within the community.

The new trailer has allowed Key to Karma and Union Bethel to team up for the second annual Thanksgiving food distribution. In 2020, the two organizations distributed full Thanksgiving meals to 400 families. This year, that number increased to 500. "We are increasing our capacity to feed the community," said William Campbell, senior pastor at Union Bethel.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to the vulnerabilities of the communities that Union Bethel and Key to Karma serves; the repercussions of which will only continue as eviction and utility shut-off moratoriums end. The networks of assistance that Union Bethel and Key to Karma represent are more important than ever. The installation of the cold storage trailers sustains this work. "The cold storage has really allowed us to be able to maximize what we have and maximize how we give it out," said Carla Cash, of Key to Karma.

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY
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Cold Storage Trailer Host: SHABACH! Emergency Resource Center

For the past 20 years, SHABACH! Emergency Resource Center (SHABACH!) has served residents in Landover, Maryland and the surrounding area. Housed within the First Baptist Church of Glenarden, the organization was born out of the founder's observance of needs that existed 20 years ago and still remain today. While food assistance has always been a core tenant of SHABACH!'s work, the organization supplements their food-based community outreach by hosting vaccination clinics and community events and providing assistance to seniors and those seeking job placements.

In the spring of 2021, SHABACH! received one of the three Washington Gas funded cold storage trailers to help increase storage capacity for their food distribution operations. The cold storage trailer is located in Landover and shared by up to eight local charitable food assistance partners. Food is sourced from multiple regional suppliers. While donations make up a significant proportion, county and state grant funding allows the organization to make supplemental purchases from local farmers markets and wholesale retailers.

The installation of the cold storage trailer has allowed SHABACH! to not only increase their buying power, but also to expand their capacity to assist the partner organizations that utilize the trailer. Now that smaller organizations can access this additional cold storage infrastructure, participating partners have greater capacity to accept large perishable donations at short notice. Further, the new trailer has also allowed SHABACH! to cast a wider net for vendors and donors, strengthening the larger community of mutual aid and food access for those in need. "It was just us trying to support the community, but because of the partners… I'm able to also support them. Helping them helps us," said Gwen Pope, manager at SHABACH!

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made clear the many structural inequities present in the food system and laid bare the vulnerabilities of all populations that SHABACH! serves; countless community members were forced out of work, and seniors had their mobility greatly restricted. Even as vaccines become widely available and restrictions lift, the negative repercussions of the pandemic continue. It is more important than ever that community partners like SHABACH! continue to provide essential food and social safety net services that have and continue to be a lifeline for so many residents in need. These trailers are a model for sustainable and necessary infrastructure to help partners sustain this work.

Cold Storage Trailer Host: Trinity Assembly of God Church

Located in Lanham, Trinity Assembly of God Church (Trinity) is both a place of worship and a food pantry that services hundreds families each week through their food rescue and distribution operation. Led by Senior Pastor Tino Cione, the Church seeks to serve the community and meet every need.

Trinity's food distribution is coordinated by Pastor Tino and a group of dedicated volunteers. Every week, Trinity receives perishable and dry good donations from local food retailers with surplus food. Often upon short notice, Pastor Tino will be notified that a large perishable donation is available, and he must act quickly to distribute the food, either directly to families in need or through a network of food pantry partners.

In March 2021, Trinity received one of the three Washington Gas funded cold storage trailers. Before the installation of their trailer, a decision to accept a food donation was accompanied by a series of intense, and often panicked, activities: the donation had to be picked up or delivered to the church, the most delicate perishable items had to find a home in a church fridge, and volunteers had to be called to distribute the food. Once the community in need had been notified of the food distribution opportunity, Trinity had to make sure the entire donation had been distributed, as there was no space to store remaining perishable food. This cycle was rewarding, but exhausting and difficult to sustain in the long run. Pastor Tino recalled instances when donations had to be declined for lack of space and volunteers, a tragic but not uncommon occurrence.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Trinity increased their food distribution efforts to meet the growing food assistance needs. Pastor Tino and the community at Trinity witnessed the impacts first hand as these needs both increased but also transformed as the unemployed population grew and the underemployed population became increasingly vulnerable to economic hardship. Trinity's efforts in sourcing and providing fresh food gives families in need one less thing to worry about. "There's always needs...If we're able to give them something, it's 40 extra dollars in their pocket," said Pastor Tino.

The installation of a cold storage trailer at Trinity has nearly doubled Trinity's food distribution by increasing their capacity to store perishable food for an extended period of time. Through Trinity's own distributions and the partner organizations and food pantries they supply, they are now serving up to 1500 people each week. Where previously Trinity staff and volunteers were working against time to distribute perishables upon arrival, the cold storage infrastructure has enabled more planned distributions with maximum attendance and greater impact. "They're actually putting things in the trailer as we speak right now," Pastor Tino remarked, "...and we can keep it for a few days." Even with their increased capacity, no food has gone to waste as there is no shortage of families in need.

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