



# Milk2MyPlate Case Study

## Overview & Key Results

- ✓ Southeast Texas Food Bank, Oak Farms & Dairy MAX convened to develop a plan for direct distribution of dairy to pantry partners in regular cadence.
- ✓ Southeast Texas Food Bank reallocated budget to prioritize dairy.
- ✓ Milk2MyPlate program led to an incremental increase of 30,000 gallons distributed to 57,000 households in 16 months.
- ✓ Pantry-level refrigeration capacity issues were addressed leveraging the Dairy MAX cooler program, which increased capacity to 600 gallons of milk at any given time.

**Read the full pilot program case study below.**

## History

In 2020, COVID-19 created unprecedented levels of unemployment. As a result, the demand for food banks also skyrocketed, leaving 42 million Americans to face hunger and risk missing out on essential daily nutrition.

## Challenges Food Banks Face in Supplying Dairy

Dairy is both the most requested *and* the least available item in food banks.

Food banks and food pantries work together to feed those in need. The food bank is the regional “warehouse” that stores mass amounts of food supplied from donations, government programs, retailers, grocery stores, and restaurants. Food pantries then receive that food and serve as a local “distribution center” where people in need can come get food to feed themselves and their families.

At the start of 2020, many food banks had never been able to offer fluid milk as an option for the pantries they service. The following explains why:

## **Access**

For many food banks, the only milk option they had access to was [shelf stable milk](#). While this type of milk is pasteurized and packaged to ensure safety and freshness for up to six months, shelf stable milk is also more expensive than traditional fluid milk. In addition, it is not as readily available for food banks to purchase.

## **Capacity**

Milk is a perishable item that requires constant refrigeration, which makes the process of transporting, delivering, and storing it somewhat complex.

Even if the logistics of transporting the milk from the food bank to the local pantries is solved for, the often-limited refrigeration capacity at food pantries prevents them from being able to stock an abundance of perishable items.

## **Consistency**

Finally, if access and capacity are solved, the challenge of keeping a *consistent* supply of milk remains.

Supply comes to food banks from a variety of channels: donations, government programs like TEFAP (Emergency Food Assistance Program), and local food businesses like grocery stores and restaurants.

However, if food banks rely solely on one or two of those sources, they run the risk of creating peaks and valleys in their available supply. Donations can be seasonal: heavier around the holidays, but more sparse at other times of the year. Likewise, government programs often operate in cycles that include the need for continual eligibility applications and program start/stop dates.

The reliance on one (or even two) channels can result in an inconsistent supply of milk in the food bank and therefore inconsistent accessibility for the families who depend on its availability at their local food pantry.

# Southeast Texas Food Bank

Southeast Texas Food Bank (SETX FB) covers an eight-county area and partners with over 130 non-profit agencies and schools to fight against the crippling effects of chronic hunger.

Prior to COVID-19, SETX FB was one of the aforementioned food banks who had never been able to offer fluid milk. However, as part of the [Coronavirus Food Assistance Program](#), the U.S. government made funds available to purchase and distribute agricultural products—packaged and distributed as *Farmers to Families Food Boxes*—to those in need beginning in spring 2020. As a result, the program created an availability of fluid milk that had never been seen before by food banks.

Southeast Texas Food Bank began to see a positive shift in their ability to better meet the needs of the pantries—and ultimately the families—they service by being able to offer a highly sought-after, needed product like fluid milk. Even though the Farmers to Families Food Boxes program was temporary (ultimately lasting from May 2020 - May 2021), SETX FB saw an opportunity to solve for some of the previous challenges involved in providing fluid milk so that they could maintain the positive impact that the availability of milk had for their network of pantries and nonprofits during the pandemic.

Here's how they kept the momentum going.

## The Approach

### A Key Partnership

Dairy MAX is one of the leading regional dairy councils in America - representing more than 900 dairy farmers and serving communities in eight states, including Texas. Its mission is to support dairy farming and drive impact for dairy farmers, while promoting American agriculture.

Through their standing relationship with Feeding Texas, Dairy MAX was introduced to Southeast Texas Food Bank. As part of their COVID-19 relief efforts, SETX FB was conducting on-site mass food distribution efforts in which they handed out thousands of Farmers to Families Food Boxes to families in need. In June 2020, Dairy MAX was able to support the effort by providing more than 4,000 gallons of milk to accompany the Food Boxes. From there, the relationship between Southeast Texas Food Bank and Dairy MAX continued to grow.

Feeding America—the nationwide network of more than 200 food banks that feed more than 46 million people—established a strategic objective of reducing barriers to provide nutritious

foods by increasing refrigeration capacity throughout their food bank network. In order to support this objective, in August 2020, Dairy MAX launched a cooler program to award commercial refrigeration equipment to Feeding America state food banks so that they could safely store fresh fluid cows' milk and other dairy foods like cheese and yogurt at the proper temperature (between 35 and 40 degrees).

## The Solutions

The path from challenge to opportunity started to become clearer. Given what SETX FB had experienced since the beginning of the pandemic, they began to connect the dots on how to not only provide fluid milk to their network of pantries during the pandemic, but also extending that availability well beyond.

### Addressing Access

Southeast Texas Food Bank began to truly see the *need* in providing fluid milk for the network and families they service. Dairy is an ideal source of nutrition with 13 essential nutrients. As the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program began to wind down in 2021, so did the funding that specifically supported the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program. This meant that the availability of government funds to purchase milk was again reduced to programs like TEFAP that existed before COVID-19.

However, throughout the pandemic, Southeast Texas Food Bank had begun looking at strategic ways it could sustain the availability of milk even if government funding decreased, and it landed on the following strategy:

- Reallocate budget to prioritize dairy (specifically fluid milk) within the food bank's overall purchase strategy. Southeast Texas Food Bank budgeted about \$15k monthly for fluid milk purchases [*based on the number of families currently being served, the number of days each one was open, and the capacity of the cooler Dairy MAX provided*].
- Purchase directly from a milk processor with a regular cadence.

### Addressing Capacity

The strain of limited refrigeration capacity at the local food pantries and nonprofits who distribute foods directly to those in need was addressed by the Dairy MAX cooler donation program. Southeast Texas Food Bank leveraged the program to receive 8 commercial coolers to date that are housed at pantries throughout their network. Each cooler can hold up to 80 gallons of milk, which has substantially increased Southeast Texas Food Bank's ability to

supply fluid milk to those in need. In the future, they look forward to the number of Dairy MAX coolers growing within their 8-county region.

## Addressing Consistency

Southeast Texas Food Bank reallocated budget to sustain access to milk, which was solidified by executing a milk purchase agreement with Oak Farms Houston in December 2020.

With that agreement in place, Southeast Texas Food Bank then directed all **purchased** milk to the food pantries who had received Dairy MAX coolers, as they had the capacity to house the milk. The additional fluid milk received from donations and/or government programs was then made available to service the rest of the Southeast Texas Food Bank network.

Ultimately, this solved for consistency because food pantries who had Dairy MAX coolers to store milk could rely on receiving a consistent weekly supply of fluid milk, and the families they serve could count on that product being available.

In addition, Oak Farms delivered the milk directly to the food pantries, versus delivery to the food bank who would then have to deliver to the food pantries with their trucks. This not only streamlined the delivery process in terms of logistics; it also increased the shelf life of the product because fresh milk was delivered directly to the pantry straight from Oak Farms.

## Results



Southeast Texas Food Bank went from not being able to supply **ANY** fluid milk at all in 2019 to supplying almost **30,000 gallons of milk that served over 57,000 people** in just under 16 months.



The benefits of having milk all week, is [that] we can complete the food we give to the families that we serve. They don't have to leave here and go purchase milk at the store, especially the elderly people that have to pay someone to bring them to their food appointment. The children are able to go home and have milk for their cereal we give them. It is a blessing for us to provide milk...and it is a blessing for them to receive [it].

**Libby Arnold**  
**Director of Community Care Outreach Pantry**  
**Nederland, Texas**

- ✔ Southeast Texas Food Bank committed to milk purchases from Oak Farms at the rate of **\$15,000 monthly**, or **\$180,000 annually**.



Without the cooler program Dairy MAX offered, we would have never thought purchasing milk was a feasible option for us. Before 2020, fresh fluid milk in pantries was just not something our area had ever experienced. Since launching the program, we've had nothing but positive responsiveness. I love hearing from our pantries and the communities about the availability of fresh milk in pantries.

**Rachel Crowder**  
**Agency Relations Specialist, Southeast Texas Food Bank**

- ✔ Southeast Texas Food Bank received eight Dairy MAX coolers, which allowed the food bank to allocate budget for milk purchases. It also increased the network's storage capacity to more than **600 gallons of milk** at any given time, or at least **2,500 gallons monthly**.



Pantries were beside themselves to be chosen for the Dairy MAX cooler program. Fresh fluid milk just wasn't something the pantries had had in the past and now they had the ability to offer it to their clients. During pantry site visits, I heard many clients exclaim their appreciation for the milk. Many of the drive thru boxes included cereal and other products that just go best with fresh fluid milk versus shelf stable.

**Rachel Crowder**  
**Agency Relations Specialist, Southeast Texas Food Bank**



Thanks to Southeast Texas Food Bank, individuals and families within their region who rely on local food pantries for weekly meals can begin to consistently access the suggested **68 gallons annually** to meet the dietary recommendations for dairy foods.



Our community has been extremely blessed with the fresh milk we receive weekly. Many people in our community cannot afford to get the nutrients they need daily. The milk provides the daily nutrients to help keep them strong. Also, our children love the fresh milk in their cereal for breakfast and the parents are thankful the milk helps keep their bones strong.

**Melissa Isaacs**  
**Executive Director, Bridge City-Orange Ministerial Alliance**



The Christian Care Center of Vidor is blessed to be able to distribute milk to our clients on a weekly basis. As volunteers, we see and hear the excitement from the clients when they realize that milk is part of their food distribution.

Two major segments of our client population who really appreciate the milk are grandparents and seniors. One of our grandparents is raising five grandchildren and tells us every week how excited the grandkids are to see milk so that they can have cereal and milk or milk and cookies for a treat. Another one of our grandparents takes care of seven grandchildren and told us that they would not have milk without our program since she cannot afford to purchase milk for all of them.

Several of our seniors have told us that they would not have milk without our assistance since they must allocate their funds for other bills, such as utilities and medical expenses. One of our seniors told us she was going home to have a glass of milk immediately since it had been over a month since she had milk. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this program with the Southeast Texas Food Bank.

**Gayle Nagi**  
**Director, United Christian Care Pantry**  
**Vidor, Texas**

## Conclusion

Southeast Texas Food Bank maintained a sense of determination before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic to continue feeding those in need. As the pandemic wore on, they evolved their strategy to ensure the needs of their community were met, one of which was providing fluid milk throughout their network.

The issues of access, capacity, and consistency that previously existed were solved for by partnerships with Dairy MAX and Oak Farms, with funding from a variety of sources.

In practice, any food bank who adopts a similar strategy to maintain a consistent supply of milk throughout their network must develop a formula that best fits their specific needs. However, Dairy MAX recommends a combination of government programs, donations, and purchase programs throughout the year. While each food bank's plan may vary, the key to Southeast Texas Food Bank's strategy to mitigate the risk of a dip in supply was to purchase milk to service all pantries with Dairy MAX coolers to ensure they had a consistent supply, while allowing milk from government programs and donations to cover the rest of their network.

## Contact Us

Want more information? Contact Michelle Van Pelt at [vanpeltm@dairymax.org](mailto:vanpeltm@dairymax.org).

