



# EMERGENCY FUNDRAISING FUELS EMERGENCY RESPONSE

**Case Study:** How the Greater Chicago Food Depository and Charity Dynamics Responded to COVID-19



**GREATER  
CHICAGO  
- FOOD -  
DEPOSITORY™**

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# INTRODUCTION

Charity Dynamics has partnered with the Greater Chicago Food Depository over the past four years on upgrading the organization's fundraising programs, including a creative overhaul of campaign design and content, increased file segmentation and targeted messaging, and a fundraising plan marrying best practices with flexibility. As a result, the Food Depository was able to respond quickly and efficiently to events surrounding the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020.

The pandemic has been truly unprecedented in every way and has upended every facet of our lives. When COVID-19 necessitated stay-at-home orders in March, many businesses were forced to close, resulting in lost or furloughed jobs and hurting people's ability to pay their bills and feed their families. Food banks like the Food Depository have been on the frontlines of COVID-19 response efforts since day one to ensure that everyone who needs food and assistance can receive it during this difficult time.

Food Depository staff immediately rolled up their sleeves and jumped into the work of getting food to those in need and providing valuable services, such as helping households apply for federal nutrition and medical benefits. At the same time, Charity Dynamics worked with the Food Depository to quickly pivot existing fundraising plans to respond to the crisis at hand. Because of the critical role the Food Depository has in meeting emergency food needs in the Chicago area, people responded with tremendous generosity.



"In working with Charity Dynamics to further our strategic approach to upgrading our digital direct response program, we have seen significant revenue growth, particularly in digital efforts over the past four years, and have also strongly positioned ourselves to be able to respond immediately and effectively to the needs of our community during the coronavirus pandemic.

In turn, the response to our calls for support during this time have been tremendous and we are so grateful for how our community has pulled together to help feed those in need."

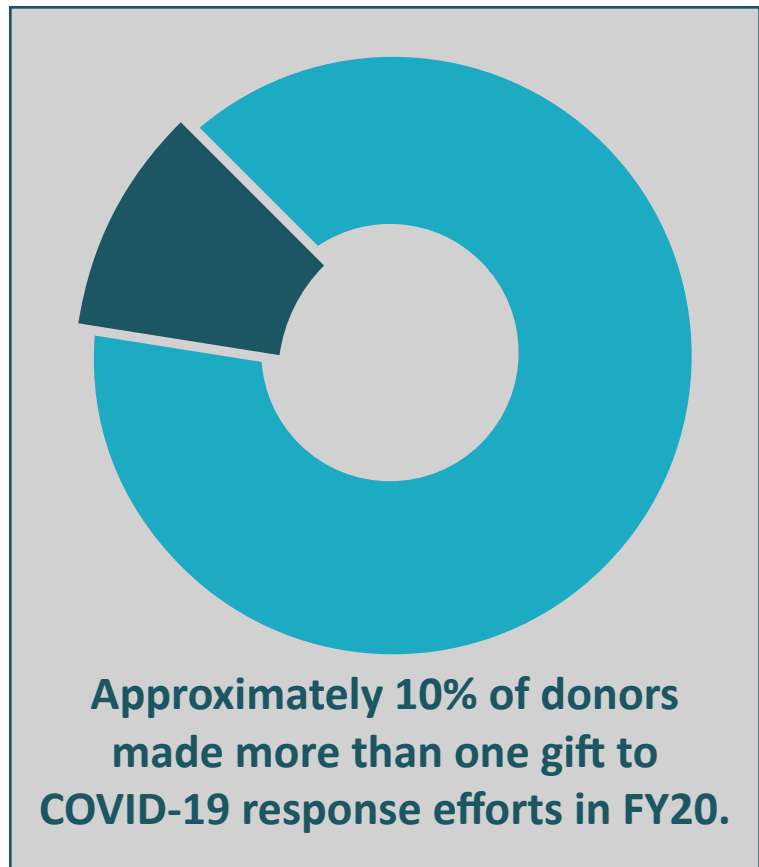
**Jill Zimmerman**  
Vice President of Development  
Greater Chicago Food Depository

# COMMUNITY RESPONSE

During the four-year partnership between Charity Dynamics and the Food Depository, the organization has **significantly increased its digital revenues—up 178%—thanks in large part to online giving in support of the Food Depository’s COVID-19 response efforts.** Digital growth was particularly accelerated at the end of fiscal year 2020 (year ending June 30) due to the overwhelming generosity of the community.

Through the end of FY20, funds had been raised across all channels — major gifts, direct mail and online — with each critical to the overall success of the organization and its mission. Charity Dynamics worked with the Food Depository to amplify its digital fundraising efforts, with impressive results.

Through a multichannel campaign and communications strategy, the Food Depository was able to raise more than \$5.46 million in direct online gifts in response to COVID-19 over a three and a half-month period. This includes #GivingTuesdayNow campaign dollars of \$374,222 from nearly 2,000 donations.





# KEY FACTORS OF THE COVID-19

## EMERGENCY RESPONSE

These results present an incredible accomplishment, but it didn't happen by accident. While the fundraising success was due in some part to the nature of the services the Food Depository provides, the organization already had a strong presence in the community, which took years of hard work to accomplish.

The Food Depository had invested in a strong digital program focused on best-in-class campaigns, sustainer growth and relationship building with key constituent and donor groups. In short, when the coronavirus emergency hit, the organization was well positioned to effectively get its message out and rally supporters.

Multiple elements played into the fundraising success the Food Depository saw during the last quarter of its fiscal year.

# SPEED, QUALITY AND FREQUENCY OF UPDATES TO SUPPORTERS

From day one of its pandemic response, the Food Depository pivoted quickly from existing plans and campaigns to pull together a message about its emergency response to COVID-19. On Thursday, March 12, well before most organizations, the Food Depository sent an email to supporters outlining its efforts.

The response was so incredible that on that Sunday, March 15, Charity Dynamics and the Food Depository sprang into action to send a second email updating its response and asking for support.

This set the tone for future emails—timely, straightforward and simple sends with real, relevant information and asks for support. A robust communications strategy followed.

**The Food Depository understood its audience, and its message came from a place of empathy. Recognizing that everyone was affected in some way by the coronavirus pandemic, it made sure to consistently lead first with the needs of the community, followed with its response to those needs and finally with the ask for support.**

## Messaging Example:



*We know the economic impact of COVID-19 will dramatically increase the need for food assistance across our community. The Food Depository is actively preparing to meet this increase in demand, but we need your help.*

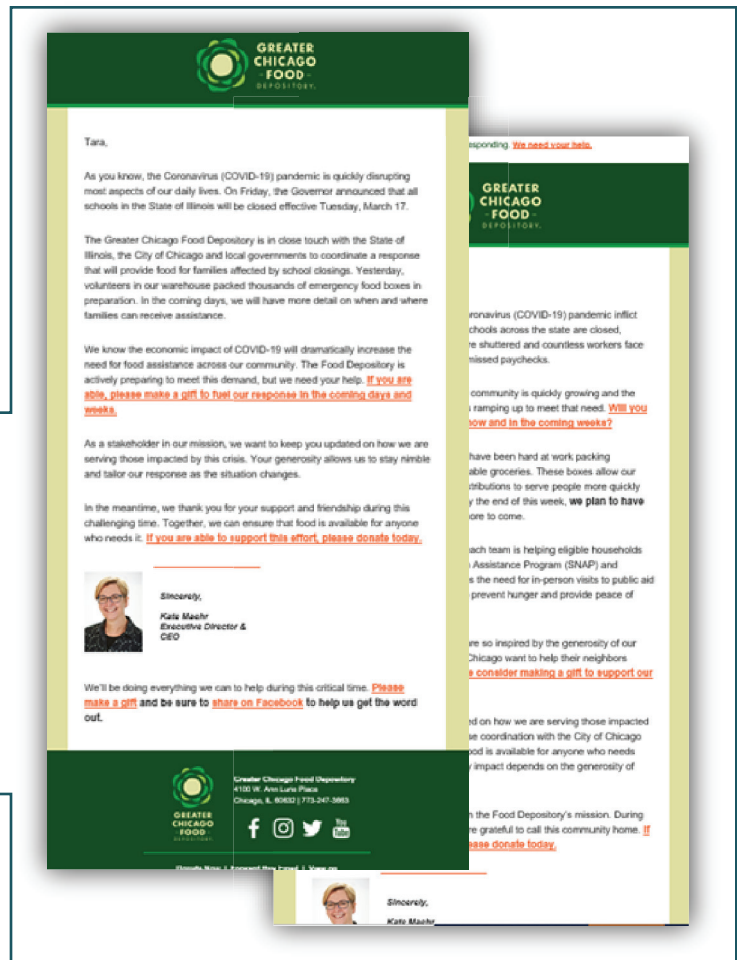
***If you are able, please make a gift to help fuel our response over the coming days and weeks.***

# THE WIDE RANGE OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Email, social media, ads, blog posts, news coverage, media partnerships and strong website marketing efforts all worked together to ensure that the Food Depository was front and center everywhere people looked online.

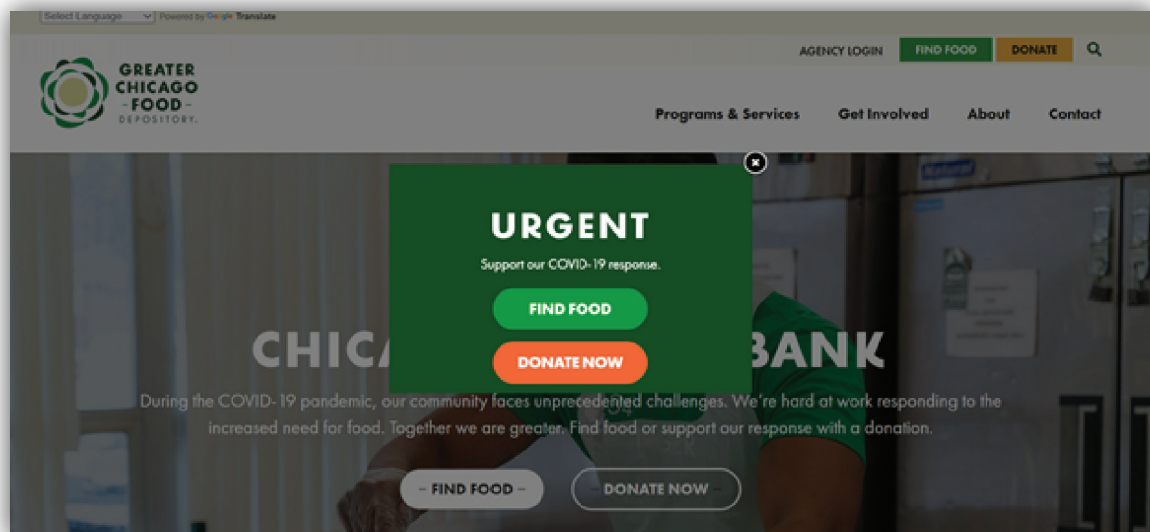
## Email Communications

The cadence of email picked up during the height of the pandemic. Updates were provided that spoke to the different ways the Food Depository continued to respond throughout the crisis.



## Website Marketing

The Food Depository received significant media coverage during the crisis with all media mentions driving people to the organization's website to donate. Thus, it was imperative that the site have an easy way to direct visitors to give. A simple lightbox served this purpose, providing paths for site visitors to find food and to make a gift.



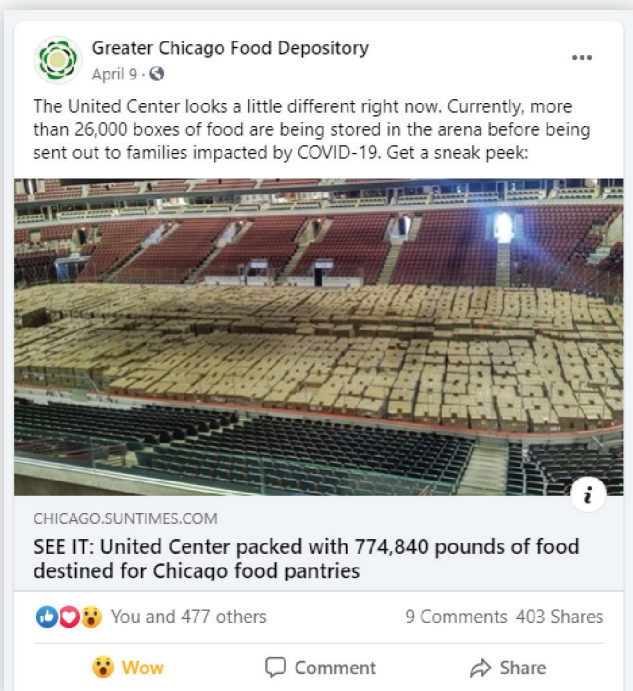
# THE WIDE RANGE OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

## Social Media

The Food Depository updated social channels frequently with a good mix of content that spanned asks for support, messages of thanks and information and updates.

Asks for support included organization-driven Facebook Fundraisers, asks directly through the Facebook and Instagram platforms and asks directed back to the organization's website.

***Most successful: The Food Depository's COVID-19 Facebook Fundraiser raised over \$65,000.***



# THE WIDE RANGE OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

## Blog

The Food Depository's blog provided a steady stream of content across its digital channels. During the COVID-19 timeframe, traffic was up, and the blog directly influenced 464 gifts toward response efforts, totaling \$114,000.





# A CONTINUED FOCUS ON SUSTAINERS

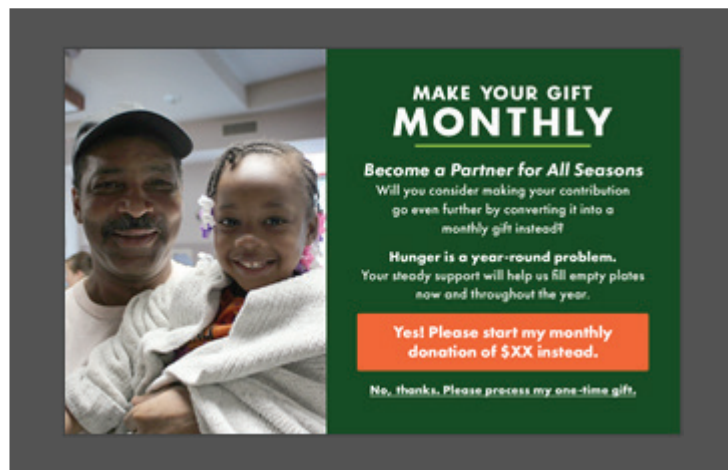
Charity Dynamics also worked with the Food Depository over the past four years on accelerating the growth of the organization's monthly giving program—Partners for All Seasons. This was achieved using the following tools:

- Dedicated invitation campaigns
- Implementation of an intercept lightbox program that offers one-time donors an immediate opportunity to convert to a monthly donor
- Implementation of a seamless user experience that offers current sustainers the opportunity to easily upgrade their monthly giving amount

***Since FY16, monthly giving has grown from \$764,000 annually to more than \$1.356 million—an increase of 77%.***

FY20 in particular saw the largest increase (24%) in year-over-year sustainer revenue. More important, the monthly donor file grew 44% during FY20, which bodes well for continued success of this program and an even larger stream of steady, predictable income for the Food Depository.

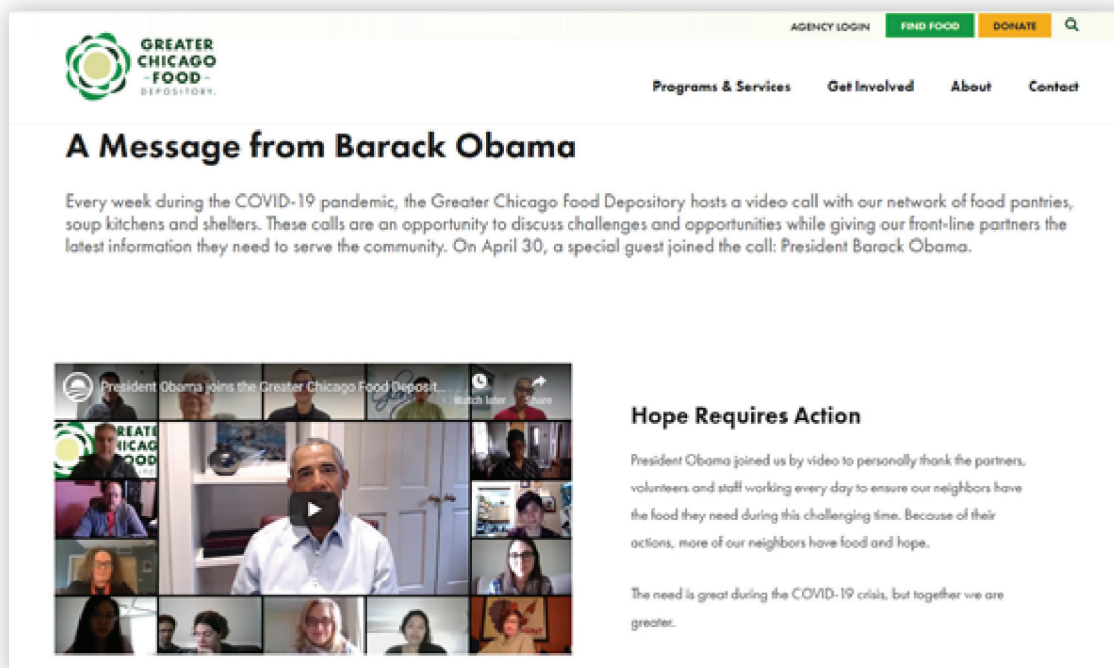
***Most of the increase in sustainers for FY20 came in response to COVID-19, which generated 41% of all new monthly donors for the fiscal year.***



# LEVERAGING SOCIAL INFLUENCERS

From city council members to local businesses to Social Ambassadors (more on that later), various groups throughout the Food Depository's community were engaged to help spread the word about the organization's response to COVID-19 and rally their own networks to support the mission.

***Former President Barack Obama even joined a Zoom call with the Food Depository's network of food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters to provide encouragement and support!***



# OUTREACH TO THE SPANISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

The Food Depository partnered with Univision to reach the Spanish-speaking community.

Content was translated into Spanish where possible, and donation forms in particular were translated to ensure that the entire donor experience was seamless from start to finish.



**Donar con Univision**

  
UNIVISION  
CHICAGO  
CONTIGO

Nosotros en Univision Chicago estamos comprometidos a combatir la inseguridad de comida que es verdaderamente grande. Es importante que nos unamos para asegurarnos que nuestros vecinos están apoyados. Por favor, comparte con tu red social para ayudarnos a tener el mejor de los años con esta colecta virtual de comida. Tu granito de arena ayudará a muchos.  
Muchas Gracias de tu familia de Univision Chicago.

ELECCIONA UNA CANTIDAD PARA DONAR

Tu donación puede ayudar a proporcionar 79 comidas a las personas necesitadas de nuestra comunidad.

DONACIÓN RECURRENTE

☐ Quiero hacer esta donación cada mes






# LAUNCHING THE FOOD DEPOSITORY SOCIAL AMBASSADORS

Charity Dynamics partnered with the Food Depository to launch a Social Ambassadors program focused on recruiting a group of dedicated supporters to share and promote the organization's content online. Launching the Social Ambassadors program during the pandemic allowed people to support the Food Depository when they were actively looking for ways to help.

The fact that everyone was online, at home and on social media made the Social Ambassadors program the perfect volunteer opportunity. The first action the group was asked to take was to share a post on social media about the organization's COVID-19 response. This set the stage for future asks to share, as well as involvement in the #GivingTuesdayNow campaign.

The Social Ambassadors program initially was planned to launch during National Volunteer Week in May. In an example of how nimbleness can pay off, particularly in a crisis situation, Charity Dynamics modified the messaging for the Social Ambassadors campaign to tie in to the Food Depository's COVID-19 response, making the call to join the group even stronger than the initial message.

Join our newest group — [Food Depository Social Ambassadors](#).

[JOIN THE TEAM](#)

Tara,

The economic impact of COVID-19 is affecting countless individuals across Chicago and Cook County. **The need to get the word out about how people can help us respond is now more important than ever.**

To this end, we're launching a new way to help: **Food Depository Social Ambassadors**. As one of our generous donors, [I know you'll be perfect for the team](#).

Members of this group are asked to do one simple, yet impactful thing—share.

Throughout the year, we'll provide links to social posts to share, emails to forward and ways to help make a difference.



**Help us spread the word**  
and put more food in the hands  
of those who need it.

**BECOME A  
SOCIAL AMBASSADOR**

The actions you'll take as a Food Depository Social Ambassador will be quick, easy, and make a big impact. **This is a way to help make a difference from your home—all you need is your smartphone and a minute of time.**

I am excited about this group and the difference I know it will make—both in helping to meet the increased need for food as COVID-19 unfolds as well as ending hunger in our community for the long term.

Jill Zimmerman from my team will be leading the charge, so after you join be sure to look for her name in your inbox.

Jill Zimmerman from my team will be leading the charge, so after you join be sure to look for her name in your inbox.

**[Please become a Social Ambassador today](#) and help even more neighbors in need throughout Chicago and Cook County.**



*With gratitude,*

**Kate Maehr**  
Executive Director &  
CEO


# LAUNCHING THE FOOD DEPOSITORY SOCIAL AMBASSADORS

The Food Depository sent two recruitment emails to its supporter file asking them to join this new and important group. Both messages had high open and click-through rates that averaged 25.13% and 3.05%, respectively.

The group quickly made an impact. In a little over a month's time — from the launch of the group on April 2 through the #GivingTuesdayNow campaign on May 5 — the group:

- Grew to **more than 900 opted-in members** — and counting.
- Gave **335 gifts totaling \$67,306** (including online donations and existing sustainer payments).
- Generated new support, with 107 members **(13%) making their first online gift to the Food Depository.**

Help us get the word out about ways to support our COVID-19 response efforts.

[JOIN THE TEAM](#)

Tara,

My name is Jill Zimmerman and I am excited to lead [Food Depository Social Ambassadors](#). I can't think of a more important time for us to join in support of our neighbors in need.

As Kate announced last week, this is a new and important group dedicated to spreading the word online and making a difference.

**Here are my top three reasons to join:**

1. **It's quick and easy.** All it takes is a minute to share a post or forward an email to family and friends.
2. **It's flexible.** You can help anytime, anywhere. All you need is an internet connection to support our neighbors facing hunger. With a lot of us now at home, this is a great way to help.
3. **It makes a big difference.** The more people we can reach, the more funds we can raise and the more lives we can help. *And that is now more important than ever.*

[Your support has made such a difference, and I know your participation in this new group will help get it off to a great start.](#) With every like, share and forward, you'll help the children, families, older adults and veterans throughout our community who turn to the Food Depository during times of need.


As the COVID-19 situation unfolds, much is uncertain. But the good that comes when people unite to help their fellow neighbor is something we can always be sure of. [I hope you'll join the team today](#) and help us support our community—now and in the days to come.

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Many Thanks,

Jill Zimmerman  
Vice President of Development

P.S. — Know someone else you think would be interested in joining? Please forward this email along.



Greater Chicago Food Depository  
4100 W. Ann Lurie Place  
Chicago, IL 60632 | 773-247-3663



[Donate Now](#) | [Forward this Email](#) | [View on Web](#)



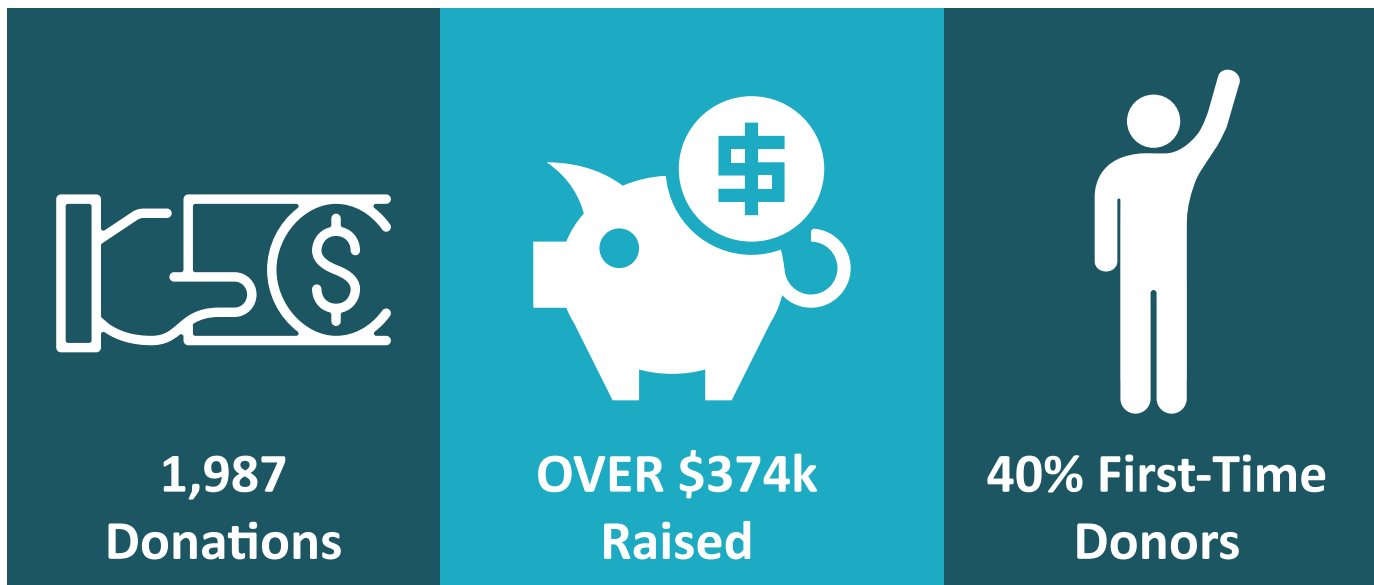
**MAXIMIZING**

**#GIVINGTUESDAYNOW  
(#GTN)**

# KEY FACTORS OF THE #GTN CAMPAIGN

In response to COVID-19, GivingTuesday.org stepped up and announced it was leading #GivingTuesdayNow, a global movement held May 5 to support pandemic response efforts.

Charity Dynamics worked with the Food Depository to launch a multichannel campaign strategy in record time that raised more than \$374,000 toward the organization's response efforts. In addition, the #GivingTuesdayNow campaign served as the first major opportunity for Social Ambassadors to lend a hand.



The campaign pushed the Food Depository's message through social media, email and site marketing efforts. A \$1 for \$1 match was leveraged across the campaign, including a special bonus gift from Humana that would be unlocked if the fundraising goal was met (and it was).

Social Ambassadors were asked in advance and on the day of to take actions such as sharing social posts, raising funds on Facebook, forwarding emails and making their own donations—**10% of members made a gift to the #GivingTuesdayNow campaign.**

# THE WIDE RANGE OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

## Social

The #GivingTuesday-Now branding was incorporated into social images that highlighted and thanked everyone who had done so much to support the Food Depository during the COVID-19 crisis.



## Site Marketing

Charity Dynamics extended the #GivingTuesdayNow message to the already very successful COVID-19 response lightbox.



**Email**

## Social Ambassadors Social Sharing



# CONCLUSION

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, people have come together to do extraordinary things, as perfectly illustrated by the emergency response provided by the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

Thanks to its preparedness leading into the crisis and the strategies and agility employed during the crisis in the online space, the Food Depository was better able to support those in need during this critical time.

As the pandemic continues to unfold and we move into 2021, the best practices outlined in this case study will continue to apply—and can apply to every nonprofit.

- Building a strong sustainer program that can provide a dependable stream of revenue and the opportunity to deepen your relationship with some of your most dedicated donors.
- Establishing a group of loyal social ambassadors who can be called upon to share your message, help break through the noise and bring new supporters to your cause.
- Staying nimble and sharing relevant and timely updates about the need, your response to that need, and how a gift can help—across the channels that best align to your target audiences.

These are the components of a winning formula that can equal digital fundraising success.

**Tara Mermis**

Principal Consultant, Charity Dynamics





## About Charity Dynamics

Charity Dynamics delivers what nonprofits need to fulfill their missions: more awareness, supporters, engagement and donations.

Our solutions include P2P program services, professional event support, and the leading mobile and social fundraising app, Boundless Fundraising™.

At Charity Dynamics, our mission is to fulfill yours.

[info@charitydynamics.com](mailto:info@charitydynamics.com)