OPERATION NOURISH

FEEDING A COMMUNITY, ONE BOX AT A TIME

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CONTENTS

01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

02 INITIATING

04 PLANNING AND ORGANIZING

11 EXECUTION

13 MONITORING AND CONTROLLING

15 CLOSING THE PROJECT

20 BIBLIOGRAPHY
As a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic and existing food insecurity, there has been a significant increase in the number of local families in dire need of food assistance.

In partnership with the Hamilton Mill United Methodist Church Pantry Food Bank, "OPERATION NOURISH" was initiated as a program designed to combat the alarming rate of food insecurity in our community by increasing the distribution capacity of the Pantry and recruiting student volunteers to maximize our community impact.

Our primary goal was to be able to meet the needs of all the families in our area struggling from food insecurity and economic depression. We streamlined our distribution process, invested in other resources, such as walk-in freezers, constantly innovated, and creatively encouraged the community, in order to achieve this goal.

Over the course of the project, several miniature "themed" operations were implemented, notably "Operation Back-to-School", "Operation Food Fight", "Operation Turkey Day", and "Operation Santa", which allowed us to fill specific needs in the community, such as providing school supplies to children or distributing turkeys around Thanksgiving.

At the conclusion of the project, our efforts proved to be successful, resulting in over a million pounds of food distributed and a nearly 3x increase in families served.
In January of 2020, the world became aware of the new COVID-19 virus, which rapidly spread to the four corners of the globe. Businesses, economies, and countries shut down in order to slow down the onslaught.

However, as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the measures taken to slow down the virus, such as quarantine periods and shutdowns, a significant number of community members lost their jobs or suffered from reduced pay (AP News).

According to Pew Research Center, the COVID-19 outbreak “swelled the ranks of unemployed Americans by more than 14 million, from 6.2 million in February to 20.5 million in May 2020” (Kochhar). With the loss of so many jobs throughout this time, families have been forced to find alternate ways to access necessities.

In addition to the pandemic, food insecurity has been on an alarming rise. Previous mass food insecurity, combined with recent economic shutdown has been attributed to even greater food insecurity.

Based on research conducted by Feeding America, a nonprofit with 200+ food banks nationwide, “food-insecure individuals—who numbered over 37 million (11.5%), including over 11 million children, in 2018—(have faced) particular challenges, and the number of people who (have experienced) food insecurity (are) likely already increasing” ("The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity").

Due to these rising unemployment rates and broadened needs for food, more people than ever have been in need of community giving organizations such as the Hamilton Mill United Methodist Church Pantry Food Bank.
The purpose of the Hamilton Mill UMC Pantry’s "Operation Nourish" was to serve at-risk, food-insecure families after the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

With 390,000 unemployment claims in April 2020 and 11.4% of Gwinnett County’s population (106,000 out of 928,000) living under the poverty line, it was evident that there was a need for help (Data USA). Furthermore, with all local school systems digital at the start of "Operation Nourish", many students had lost access to their free school meals (AP News).

After surveying this need in our community, our rationale was that we could make a significant impact in our community by harnessing the existing Pantry structure that had already been serving 150 families per week prior to the pandemic and expanding to meet the increased demand. We were better equipped to take on this new challenge than other local organizations that would have to start from scratch.

During the planning phase, we also decided to incorporate smaller initiatives within "Operation Nourish" to help with the overall goal of accommodating more families and reaching a broader range of families. We realized that specific “themed” initiatives like "Operation Back-to-School" in August and "Operation Santa" in December would be pivotal in maximizing our impact and focusing attention on local families with children.

The benefits of these initiatives were not only to provide as many local families with essential resources, but also develop a food-assistance network and provide a means for community members, specifically students, to give back through their time and gain experience serving and actively making a difference.