Gisele Fetterman, 33, and fellow Free Store volunteer Shiane Prunty, 32, (far right) distribute food donated from Costco to clients Edith Bell (left) and Mary Martin (center left), in the parking lot of the Free Store in Braddock in 2015. The organization launched
724 Food Rescue in late 2017, and has distributed more than 27,000 pounds of food in Westmoreland County so far.

With a $20,000 donation from Uber and thousands of pounds of food from Farm Aid 2017, Pittsburgh-based 412 Food Rescue (http://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/13372854-74/splash-park-and-more-proposed-for-greensburg-pool) has been able to push to the 724 area code on multiple fronts.

And through a partnership with the Westmoreland County Housing Authority, the group has been able to significantly expand its service area, which now includes Beaver, Butler, Fayette and Washington counties.

“We launched 724 Food Rescue in September 2017,” 412 Food Rescue CEO Leah Lizarondo said. “We did it in line with Farm Aid in Washington County. They donated all their surplus food, and we kind of used that as our launch.”

Started in 2015, the organization stops perfectly good, safe and edible food from going to landfills. To date, they've redistributed more than 3 million pounds of food.

That includes more than 27,000 pounds of food delivered to 22 housing communities in Westmoreland.

“Last year, we reached 2 million pounds, and Giant Eagle was able to work with us to help expand to additional counties,” Lizarondo said. “So we kind of used Farm Aid and Giant Eagle as our main donors, and that's what pushed things forward.”

In addition to Giant Eagle, corporations such as Gordon Food Service and Trader Joe's, as well as local farmers and other vendors, contribute to 724 Food Rescue's distribution network, which includes 475 nonprofit partners, Lizarondo said.

Westmoreland housing officials first heard about the program through American Healthcare Group (http://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/13372854-74/splash-park-and-more-proposed-for-greensburg-pool), a Pittsburgh organization that brings preventative services and on-site health programming into schools, employer groups and affordable housing locations across the U.S.

“We're in the housing business, but we reach out to as many agencies as we can to provide nutritional meals not only to our elderly residents but also to families,” said Westmoreland County Housing Authority Executive Director Mike Washowich. “The 724 program has been great. It's a critical component for us when it comes to helping seniors stay in their homes and age gracefully.”

And food distribution from 724 Food Rescue doesn't only help to provide individual meals.

“In a lot of cases, they're donating food we can use to set up something like a community meal, so we can utilize the program as a way to get residents together to socialize,” Washowich said.

Lizarondo said that with nearly 500 distribution partners, her organization is within reach of 400,000 people, including 90,000 residents living under the poverty line.

And most importantly, she said, that food is within walking distance.
“When we activate distribution sites, we try to measure how many people are in walking distance of an access point,” Lizarondo said. “Because for people who are food-insecure, many of them do not necessarily have a car. So we try to bring food closer to where people already are, which is why we work with housing authorities.”

Washowich said he couldn’t be happier with the results.

“We thought this was a great opportunity not only to learn from what they’ve done with 412, but to grow and adopt some of those same practices here,” he said.

For more, see 412foodrescue.org (https://www.youngwood.org/park-pool/) .

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