



45 Years of Dedication.

A Future Built Together (1981–2026)

From Food Rescue to Lasting Solutions

More than 45 years ago, a coalition of faith communities came together with a shared purpose: to find food for neighbors in need. What began as a search became something more. Today, Operation Food Search is not only responding to hunger; we are building solutions that address it at every level.

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Local Origins

In 1979, a former priest named Henry Leissing stopped by Roger Dierberg's grocery store with an idea. He wanted to take the produce that didn't get sold and give it to people who were hungry. Roger liked that idea, so Henry began to pick up the produce twice a week and deliver it to Hi-Pointe pantry in St. Louis City. From there, the effort grew to become what is now Operation Food Search.

The original commitment to rescuing food for the benefit of those in need still shapes our work today. Through our growing network of pantries and other community sites, OFS provides food to more than 200,000 people each month in 24 counties in Missouri and Illinois.

But our mission and scope of work have expanded into a coordinated system designed not only to address the need for food today, but to build long-term solutions to the problem of hunger.

What Our Work Looks Like Today

Today our work reflects a more complex world and a more comprehensive approach to food access:



Rescuing and distributing food through a growing network of partners and agencies



Supporting children and families through programs like Operation Backpack and agency food pantry network



Expanding access to fresh, affordable food through MetroMarket



Building knowledge and confidence through nutrition education



Connecting food and health through innovative "food is medicine" programs

Together, these efforts reduce barriers, strengthen access, and support long-term health and well-being for individuals and families.



May 13, 1981: Recognizing that hunger relief required a coordinated and structured approach, community leaders formally incorporated Operation Food Search as a nonprofit. In its first year, OFS had an operating budget of about \$75,000 and distributed approximately \$400,000 worth of food to neighbors in need.



45 years later and with an operating budget of more than \$10 million and 57 employees, OFS is continuing to meet the ever-increasing need for food while building long-term solutions to the problem of hunger. In the 2025 fiscal year, OFS distributed more than \$32 million worth of food.

Adaptability Is Our Strength

In times of crisis and uncertainty, food becomes even more critical. From the COVID-19 pandemic to devastating tornados and government shutdowns, Operation Food Search has been ready to respond quickly to emergencies. By scaling operations, expanding distribution, forging new partnerships and remaining innovative, we've ensured individuals and families have had the support they need when they need it most.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, we:

- ✔ Scaled distribution rapidly to meet unprecedented demand
- ✔ Shifted to safe, low-contact models like drive-through and grab-and-go distributions
- ✔ Partnered with schools, libraries and community organizations to continue reaching children and families
- ✔ Expanded support to families experiencing food insecurity for the first time

Following severe weather events, including tornados, we:

- ✔ Mobilized emergency food distribution to affected communities
- ✔ Coordinated with partners to reach neighborhoods quickly
- ✔ Adapted operations to deliver food where access had been disrupted



As SNAP changes and economic disruptions impacted families, we:

- ✔ Increased food distribution through partner agencies and MetroMarket
- ✔ Helped connect individuals and families to available resources
- ✔ Provided emergency food to workers and households facing income loss

No matter what uncertainty we face, our commitment remains the same: to ensure that everyone in our community can rely on consistent access to food and support.

“Being flexible in meeting the growing and ever-changing needs in the community is something Operation Food Search has accomplished for 45 years. As the demands for hunger relief continue to grow and shift, I know the resilience and commitment of the OFS team is up for the challenges that lie ahead.”

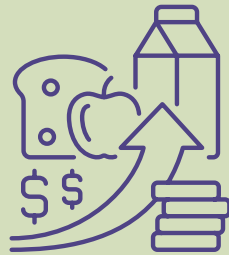
Sunny Schaefer,
former OFS Executive Director, 1996–2019

Looking Ahead

Even after 45 years of progress, the need remains urgent. Rising food costs, changes to critical benefits, and persistent disparities in access continue to impact families across our region.

Food prices are up since 2020.

25-30%



SNAP policy changes are reducing food benefits.



Supplemental
Nutrition
Assistance
Program

Food Insecurity Rates:



14.4%

OFS service area
(MO/IL)

18.4%

St. Louis City

1 in 6 children

in our service area is at risk
of hunger.



At the same time, we know more than ever about what works. By combining food access with education, healthcare partnerships, and advocacy, more families can put nutritious food on the table, improve their health, and build stability for the future. Barriers to access are being reduced, children are better supported, and communities are more resilient. This is the impact made possible through a collective commitment to ensuring everyone has the food they need to thrive. We couldn't do this without the dedication of our committed staff, selfless volunteers, loyal partners and generous donors.

Our vision is clear: a region where everyone can access the nutritious food they need to lead healthy lives. As we work to make that a reality, we need to go beyond food banking and continue innovating and collaborating.

Together, we are building on what we know works — and growing it to meet the needs of tomorrow.

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