



# UMB News

## Steady Diet of Donations Makes Meal Program a Hit

**June 23, 2020** | By [Jen Badie](#)

The [University of Maryland, Baltimore](#)'s (UMB) Food for Our Front Lines initiative provided nourishment not just for essential workers who are keeping campus safe and operational during the COVID-19 pandemic, it helped sustain the surrounding community as well.



*West Baltimore restaurant owners were key to the success of UMB's initiative to provide lunches for essential employees working during the pandemic.*

The program, which ran from April 1 through June 22, delivered 4,791 lunches to UMB's front-line workers thanks to 477 donations from the University community. In addition, the effort

gave \$60,300 worth of business to restaurants in West Baltimore.

“This initiative accomplished what we set out to do: help small businesses in West Baltimore stay afloat during quarantine, and support our colleagues still working on campus during the height of the pandemic by providing nutritious lunches,” **Laura Kozak, MA**, associate vice president, Office of Communications and Public Affairs, and **Ashley Valis, MSW**, executive director, Office of Community Engagement, said in an email announcing the end of the campaign.

Essential employees were grateful to be recognized and receive the food while working under extreme and often isolating conditions.

“The first couple of days, there was nowhere around that you could get anything to eat,” said **Ida Powell**, a custodian with Environmental Services. “It’s a totally different dynamic, being down there, working, and you have literally no one to talk to. ...

“When they say front line, they’re always thinking about just the grocery workers, the nurses, the doctors. And to be recognized as a front-line worker, because I am, I am a front-line worker, I am a part of this pandemic, and to know that they appreciated me enough to give me something to eat, it was amazing.”

The initiative enlisted restaurants in West Baltimore that are minority-, immigrant-, or female-owned. The restaurants that participated were Culinary Architecture, Faidley’s Seafood, The Land of Kush, Neopol Savory Smokery, Ruben’s Mexican Food, Taco Town, The Back Yard, and Zella’s Pizzeria.

The owners said the initiative allowed them to keep their businesses open and their workers employed even as the pandemic caused other restaurants to shutter.

“It was a pleasure to provide meals to our front line during this challenging time,” said Damye Hahn, whose family owns Faidley’s Seafood. “We greatly appreciate the generous donations that made the program possible. With your help, we were able to keep all of our employees working during COVID.”

Sylva Lin, owner of Culinary Architecture, agreed.

“Culinary Architecture would like to thank UMB’s donors for your generosity during the COVID-19 crisis. Each food order that was placed with us helped us keep our doors open another day and retain our staff,” she said. “When a small business says that it is survival day-to-day, we mean it. The orders coming from UMB gave us some security and relief during this very stressful time.”

Powell said she has continued to buy lunches from some of the restaurants since the program started.

“The lunches were awesome. There was a variety, and we appreciated it,” she said, adding that there was something for everyone. “Those lunches that they brought, it wasn’t the same old, same old.”

**Syreeta Haskins**, a Parking and Transportation Services staff member, called the meals “top quality,” adding, “The food was enjoyable; I was very grateful.”

The effort was spearheaded by Kozak when the University was shut down in March because of the pandemic. Students were home attending classes virtually and the majority of faculty and staff had begun teleworking. But more than 200 employees remained on campus to fulfill essential duties. They included workers from Police and Public Safety, Parking and Transportation Services, Custodial Services, Facilities and Operations, Payroll, Procurement, and Vet Services, as well as other departments. Because of the closure of restaurants, the workers otherwise would not have had a place to get lunch.

Donations included initial funding from the UMB Foundation, as well as \$10,000 from Pete Buzy, who serves on the foundation board, and his wife, Eileen. The University put out a call for donations April 1 to pay for the lunches, which cost about \$12.50 and included a sandwich or salad, chips, and a cookie or dessert bar.

So many members of the University community responded that the program was able to provide two lunches a week to the essential workers for more than two months. **Madison Haas, MSW**, economic inclusion coordinator, Office of Community Engagement, coordinated with the restaurants and department heads, while **Denise Meyer**, associate director of Environmental Services, and her team worked to receive the food when it was delivered and distribute it.

“I thought it was an amazing initiative that gave back to our front-line essential workers here at UMB,” Meyer said. “I loved seeing how many people were able to donate and provide meals to those who were keeping the campus going during an unprecedented time.”

Donors said they contributed to show appreciation to the front-line workers, to stay connected to the University as they worked from home, and to help keep local businesses afloat.

“I wouldn’t be able to do my job effectively, even from home, without the support of the people who are still going to campus every day,” said **Katie Gresia McElroy, PhD, RN**, assistant professor, Department of Family and Community Health, University of Maryland School of Nursing. “They are the reason why the School of Nursing and the entire campus are still functioning in this difficult time. Supporting Food for Our Front Lines is something I can do to say thank you.”

**Paul Sacco, MSW, PhD**, associate professor and associate dean for research, University of Maryland School of Social Work, called donating a “win-win.”

“Working from home, it gives me the chance to make even a small connection to the heroic efforts of our front-line colleagues,” Sacco said. “I also think about the restaurants that serve our campus community, many that are small businesses dependent on the employees of UMB. These are our neighbors and an integral part of our community.”

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