

We hear a lot about hunger.

You've no doubt seen public service announcements on television, asking you to give to charitable organizations to help feed people. You've probably even seen crowdfunding efforts on digital media.

It's a fact of life: Some people around the world are starving – and not just in third-world nations. Some hungry people live next door, down the street or somewhere in your town.

How can we even begin to feed all these hungry people?

Maybe by taking the issue one jar at a time. A jar of peanut butter, that is. Drop off a jar of peanut butter at any of a number locations across the Panhandle from Oct. 1 through Nov. 21, and you'll help feed a family.

This effort doesn't happen by magic. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension agents in counties across the Florida Panhandle work with the public and the Florida Peanut Producers Association to coordinate this annual event, known as the Peanut Butter Challenge.

Of course, you can donate peanut butter to a charity or a needy family anytime you want, but UF/IFAS Extension has set aside October and much of November to emphasize peanut butter collections.

One jar from each person adds up to thousands of peanut butter containers that wind up at food pantries across the Panhandle each year at this time. The less fortunate then pick up the peanut butter at the pantries.

During the past six years, Panhandle residents have generously donated thousands of pounds of peanut butter to help feed hungry families in northwest Florida.

Data support the need for these donations. One in seven Floridians – including one in five children -- struggles with hunger, according to Feeding America, the nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization.

Specific to the Panhandle, many residents are hungry or at risk of not getting sufficient food. For example, in Bay County, 26.2 percent of children rated as food-insecure in 2015, according to Feeding America. Food-insecure means the children lack access to, or resources, to buy or eat nutritious food.

UF/IFAS Extension faculty are working to provide food access to more people and stem this tide of hunger.

Since 2012, volunteers and UF/IFAS Extension faculty have collected thousands of jars of peanut butter from residents, volunteer groups and businesses in 16 northwest Florida counties.

In 2017, UF/IFAS Extension county offices received 10,800 jars of peanut butter, more than triple the previous year's total of 3,875 jars.

Those donations don't normally come from groups or companies giving 1,000 jars apiece, although that giving is welcome.

Jars generally come in little by little, one person or family at a time. It just takes a jar – about \$1 or \$2, or you can go to a grocery store and purchase peanut butter through a “buy-one-get-one-free” deal. Drop off that jar at your county Extension office or at any of a number of locations that your county will tell you about.

Extension agents in your county are out in the community this time of year, spreading the word about the Peanut Butter Challenge. Look for them at schools, churches, community events and more.

It's my honor and privilege to serve as the leader of the UF/IFAS faculty who give their all to help feed the hungry people of the Panhandle. The Challenge is a community-based event, and residents from all walks of life donate.

This effort comes down to the generosity of Panhandle residents. They just keep giving and giving. Many are stepping up, and so can you.

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