

It's not just about the potatoes!

By Mary Anne O'Donnell, SSND Associate and Assistant Director, Catholic Charities of Baltimore



A donation of 30,000 pounds of potatoes was distributed to families in need at the outbreak of COVID-19 in April 2020.

My connection with SSND began in 1990, when I was hired to work at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland (NDMU). I took the job because I was drawn to the mission of the college: transformation of women to change the world. I quickly learned that this mission was bigger than the college; it was the charism of the SSND. It was the commitment to transformation, the commitment to globalization, the commitment to the poor, to women, to the environment that empowered me to make a formal covenant as an Associate.

Further reflection and soul searching led me to change my ministry and accept a job at Catholic Charities in Baltimore. For the past 25 years, I have been transformed by my encounters with Marylanders who have been negatively impacted by disparity, inequity and unjust treatment. As I journey with fellow human beings who are living in poverty, with addiction and mental health issues, I am constantly reminded that giving food and providing

services is not enough. For change to happen we need more individuals who are willing to advocate and work together to make systemic and institutional change. We need people who can tell the real stories of lives impacted by such disparities.

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Now to the potatoes! During COVID-19 a call came from a local farmer who had 30,000 pounds of potatoes to donate. WOW! What would we do with all of those potatoes?

Five years ago, during the uprising following the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, we were quickly reminded of the

reality that long-term solutions must be more than running into a community with money, food and the mentality of “saving” a community. What difference could Catholic Charities make by preserving the dignity of the people in the community, by recognizing the assets of the community and empowering them to use their assets?

We met with community groups and helped them discover what they needed in order to open the closed food pantries and feeding programs. We walked beside them, connecting them to needed resources, helping to cut through red tape. We listened. We became collaborators with the community.

So when we had all of those potatoes in April we knew exactly where to go. A call to community collaborators had 30,000 potatoes quickly delivered to low income families, seniors living in subsidized housing and unable to get groceries, immigrants, and food pantries. We engaged volunteers to deliver these potatoes and while doing so they became partners in understanding the issues and needs of the human beings they touched.

What will happen after COVID-19? The potatoes were important but understanding the issues of inequity and the need for systemic change is the global concern that needs our prayer and action. We have decided to create a “Catholic Charities without walls,” which will take us to more communities where we will better understand how we can advocate for the most vulnerable. What can you do?