



# Celebrates 50 Years Feeding Arizona

## AFMA MEMBERS DONATE MILLIONS OF POUNDS OF FOOD ANNUALLY

By David M. Brown

*The poor we will always have. But why the hungry?*  
—John van Hengel

St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance in Phoenix, the world's first, is joyously celebrating 50 years of service. The billionth meal to the hungry of Arizona will be served this September.

But at home, the state of Arizona is the nation's third highest for childhood food insecurity.

In fiscal 2016/17, St. Mary's distributed 86,681,920 pounds of donated food statewide — about 13 million more than the last fiscal year. That's 250,000 meals daily to those in need and each month 40,000 emergency food boxes — a three-four day supply of food for a family of four.

Yet Apache County in northern Arizona is the hungriest in the nation.

Throughout Arizona, **more than 400 agency partners manage** 600-plus distribution programs for the food St. Mary's provides. And magnanimous AFMA members — mega-grocers as well as independents — annually donate tens of millions of pounds of food.

Still, a year ago, just 10 days into his job as president and CEO of the Phoenix-based nonprofit, Tom Kertis received an e-mail from a man living near Tuba City on the Navajo Nation in northern Arizona. His brother had lost sight in his right eye and had had his right foot amputated; the loss of the other eye and foot was

imminent. They were living paycheck to paycheck; they were hungry.

"I am writing to ask if there is any way you can assist us with a little food; I am not talking about much," the man continued. "I've never asked for help before."

St. Mary's contacted the Sisters of St. Jude, an agency partner in the area, and arranged for that help. "If we're not here, what happens to that man?" Kertis asks. "Does this man and his brother fall through the cracks? It hit me like a ton of bricks. We're changing people's lives — maybe even saving people's lives."

### **Serving by Helping People Serve Their Families**

St. Mary's distributes food to nine of Arizona's 15 counties including to sister food banks in Mesa, Tucson and Yuma. The other six counties are served by local food banks. "We're always analyzing needs," Kertis says. "If we don't have an agency partner in an unserved area, often we determine to do it ourselves."

Much of the food is donated from area grocers, many of them AFMA affiliates. This includes produce, dairy, fruits and vegetables,

canned goods, breads and dry goods. Other donations come from food drives organized by groups such as fraternal organizations, businesses, churches and schools. And, individuals donate three million pounds a year.

St. Mary's has to spend money, too. Drawing on its financial donations, the food bank supplements donated food with purchased staples including produce, meats, peanut butter, pasta, rice and beans.

Produce comprises 45 percent of the food St. Mary's distributes. Recently, through Tucson affiliate, the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, St. Mary's heard that tons of quality produce in the border city of Nogales were being landfilled. Kertis and his team arranged to rescue the food and transport it to those in need at a cost of about three cents a pound.

But meat is expensive, as grocers often freeze overstock and retain most of its value in contrast to donating produce and writing it off on taxes. For example, St. Mary's buys ground turkey at about 70 cents a pound—cheaper than grocery cost—but still costly from a nonprofit bankbook. "People still need food, even if it's not all donated," Kertis says.

About 20 percent of St. Mary's food donations are provided directly from its two



Tom Kertis,  
President and CEO

distribution sites: the Knight Transportation Community Services Center, 3131 W. Thomas Road, across the street from the 120,000-square-foot Stardust Foundation Campus, Del E. Webb Distribution Center, 2831 North 31st Avenue, the operations base since 1991; and, on the west side, a center in Surprise, 13050 West Elm Street.

Agency partners distribute the remaining 80 percent to: children's food programs in schools and community centers; food pantries; domestic violence and homeless shelters; church missions; and rehab, senior and veterans centers.

That list grows as Kertis and his crew of 173 employees and thousands of volunteers discover areas not being served and wrap them into the fold. "Any nonprofit which has a food program or meal and snack service as part of their mission can become a St. Mary's partner," he says.

Even with these efforts, St. Mary's always has to think creatively. In Navajo County, for

example, one of the company's 17 semi-trucks regularly delivers to Native Americans from the back of the trailer. People pull up in cars and even on horseback. Deliveries are made regardless of weather, which can be snowy, blustering and very cold in the winter.

So, too, when the federal government temporarily closed the Grand Canyon in 2013, a St. Mary's truck was granted passage to deliver meals for stranded workers. And, every Christmas, a military helicopter lands at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, serving members of the Havasupai Native Americans. A soldier Santa Claus hands out the toys, St. Mary's the food.

And, just this year, La Paz County, during a financial restructuring, had to lay off people, including those running its three food banks. "We went out and hired their employees to keep them open," Kertis says. "We just couldn't let those people go hungry."

## Garbage Bins to Global Boon

Today's massive effort began with a small insight. In the late '60s, retired businessman John van Hengel (1923–2005) was volunteering at a soup kitchen when he noticed a woman regularly foraging grocery garbage bins to feed her children.

He thought magnanimously, metaphorically: Why not gather the discarded or excess quality food and bank it, as you would money, so that those in need could withdraw it?

"So he went to his parish basilica, St. Mary's downtown, and they gave him a building, an old pick-up truck and \$3,000. Hence the name St. Mary's," Kertis says, noting that the organization is not religiously affiliated. That 5,000-square foot building downtown became the nation's first food bank, distributing 275,000 pounds of food in just its first year.

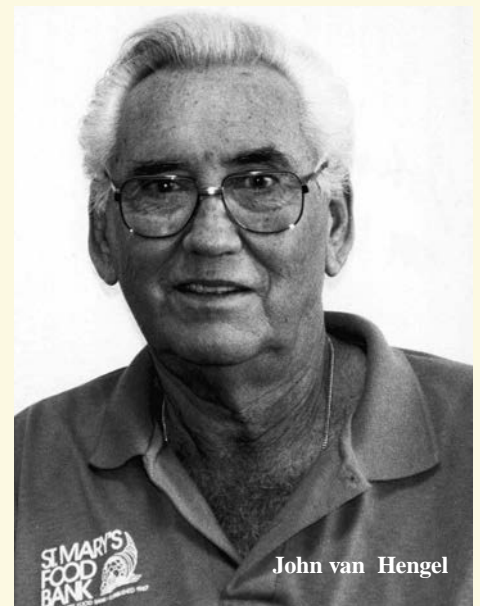
To honor van Hengel's vision, the Arizona State Capitol Museum will host an exhibit from September to December, featuring memorabilia from the first 50 years. "St. Mary's Food Bank is a treasure for the city and the state," he says.

And the country and the world: By 1977, food banks had been established in 18 cities nationwide. Two years later, van Hengel established Second Harvest, later called America's Second Harvest the Nation's Food Bank Network and since 2008 Feeding America.

The country's largest domestic hunger-relief organization with 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries, including St. Mary's, the Chicago-based nonprofit focuses on the 46 million Americans at risk of hunger, including 13 million children and 7 million seniors.

And, because of Hengel's work, there are 32 countries with food banks worldwide, coordinated through the Global Food Banking Network.

Among those who guided St. Mary's after van Hengel left were Terry Shannon, president and CEO from 2004–2012. During his tenure, St. Mary's Food Bank merged with the Westside Food Bank in 2005 to become St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance. "Terry helped us grow and get us to the next level," Kertis says. "And we've flourished because of his work."



John van Hengel





(Left to right) Lisa Notaro, Chief Development & Community Relations Officer; Tom Kertis, President and CEO; Duane Lawson, Chief Operating Officer and Sarah Stuckey, Chief Financial Officer

### Stretching a Dollar to Cover the Dinner Table

Kertis has been in food distribution his entire career, starting in native Pittsburgh, moving to Detroit, San Diego, then Phoenix. He first became a donor and a volunteer at St. Mary's. In 2013, he joined the board of directors.

"When the CEO opportunity came up, because I was in the food distribution business, this seemed like a perfect way to give back to the community," Kertis says. "Here, I hope to bring some of that expertise to food banking," he explains. "We want to continue streamlining and bringing

commercial practices to the nonprofit world."

To start, he wants to ensure financial donors that their dollars are being maximized. Only 15 percent of the food and 16 percent of the funding St. Mary's receives come from government sources, such as the Department of Agriculture and grants. This is done intentionally, Kertis notes: "We do not want to be too dependent on government for our commitment to help feed those in need."

He explains that through the efficiencies of volume and a lean process, \$1 stretches into seven meals, and that 95 percent of all donations go to food programs, not fat administrative salaries. "We want our donors to know that we are good stewards of their donations. Every dollar we save, that's another dollar to feed someone with food insecurity," he says.

Kertis and his team are working with agency partners to strengthen and streamline them, too. Perhaps St. Mary's will supply some tools or a pallet jack to help move goods more efficiently. And, in house, he cut staff by 20, improving the process. "We've increased to more than a million pounds a month distributed in the last year," he says, "but we can, and must, do better."

food insecurity are even more vulnerable, St. Mary's has set up 100 locations this year where they can serve breakfast and lunch when school isn't in session. This summer, 10,000 meals will be served.

Last year, St. Mary's approached the city of Holbrook in northern Arizona and offered to start a summer program with the school district this summer. Approximately 20 percent of Holbrook residents are food insecure and 34 percent of children in Navajo County (Holbrook is the county seat) are food insecure, but there had been no summer meal sites last year, Kertis says.

Some officials said, "No one will come." But they built it, and they did: two summer venues. "The sites served 100 breakfasts and 300 lunch meals on day one," he says, "and in June, an average of 400 meals were served daily, with families coming as far as 50 miles away to eat."

Kertis says. "Sometimes we are a catalyst. Much hunger in America is invisible; even those in the community often don't see it."

Another St. Mary's outreach stocks the school pantries with essentials. And, the popular Backpack program, again when the schools are in session; sends bags of food home with the children, stocked with nine pounds of canned goods, rice, pasta and fresh produce. Often these are supplemented to help feed siblings who might not be in school. This costs St. Mary's about \$7 each.

For adults, St. Mary's established the Community Kitchen in 2000, a 12-week culinary training and life skills program focusing on people with barriers to employment: They've been incarcerated, they're struggling with substance abuse, they've been homeless or victims of domestic violence.

"We teach money management and anger management and build in drug testing," Kertis says. "And we strictly monitor attendance; if you have a job, you're expected to show up." The last class graduated 80.

Tied to this is CK Catering, in which St. Mary's serves as a commercial caterer for weekend events, with the students providing the service. "We cross-train them in Kids Café, too, so that they have both high volume and specialty work for their résumés," Kertis explains.

"We believe that we have to 'Feed the Line' through food distribution," Kertis says, "but we also want to 'Shorten the Line' through skills training such as this and our children's programs, which help them focus on their futures and not daily hunger."

### Filling the Conduit with Kindness

"We are a conduit in simplest terms," Kertis says. "We get excess food to people who need it."

AFMA members feed this pipeline through the Grocery Rescue program, a component of van Hengel's start-up concept. The typical scenario: A truck stops at the back door or loading dock of a grocer multiple times weekly. The driver will load food that, though still in code, the store can't sell or wishes to donate.



St Mary's Food Bank 1967



St Mary's Food Bank 2017



### Feed the Line, Shorten the Line

Many current programs have been added since van Hengel's visionary start-up a half century ago, especially for children.

The Kids Café program provides 8,000 after-school meals daily in schools or community centers with approved programs for children who might otherwise only get one other school meal during the day.

And, in the summertime, when children with

Each of the chains have set rules what they can and cannot give, Kertis says.

“The Grocery Rescue program is vital not only to St. Mary’s but to hundreds of our agency partners who use it as one of their main sources of food locally,” Kertis says. “One AFMA member—whose relationship with us dates back decades—will even call us if they hear we have a specific need for an item, say, canned fruits, veggies, water, butter, and ask what they can do to help.”

About 14 months ago, St. Mary’s improved on the long-time process. The food used to go from the store to the St. Mary’s distribution center, then out to the agencies. Problem: A day of freshness was lost to inefficiency.

“Now we pick it up and take it right to an agency, same day delivery, whether it’s a food bank or a rescue mission,” he says, noting that this is done with the benefit of enhanced communications and software. “It’s more efficient, we save more food and we get it to people quickly.”

AFMA and non-AFMA associates help in many other ways.

Walmart, for example, the largest grocery donor both in dollars and pounds rescued, donated more than \$170,000 to St. Mary’s during its “Fight Hunger, Spark Change” initiative in 2017.

And Fry’s, through The Kroger Company, continues with its annual fundraising drive at the registers for food banks in November and December. The grocer also partners for the Holiday Giving Drive and the “Bring Hope to the

Table” event, which raises tens of thousands of dollars for St. Mary’s annually.

Albertsons/Safeway, Bashas’ and Food City all partner with St. Mary’s and other Arizona food charities for the annual 3TV Childhood Hunger Drive in September. And, Sprouts is having its “Grab and Go” Food Bags for St. Mary’s, also in November and December. “These bags have just the right items for the food bank, so much so that we can pass them out ‘as is’ to our clients,” Kertis says.

And, Albertsons/Safeway is the grocery partner for the annual Super Saturday Turkey Drive, Saturday, November 18, at 30 stores Valleywide. The donations of turkeys, Thanksgiving food items and cash allow the

food bank to prepare for its Thanksgiving Distribution event the following week, during which 12,000-plus turkeys and food boxes are distributed to those in need, he explains.

And, each April, during the Maricopa County Fair, St. Mary’s schedules a food drive, traditionally sponsored by Sanderson Ford.

“Without the help of our AFMA affiliates,” Kertis says, “we just couldn’t do what we do.”

### Help Fill the Line and Shorten the Line

But how can AFMA company members and their employees and families help even more?

“Donate food, time and funds,” Kertis says.

Food and water can be donated individually and by organizations, such as through food drives.

People can donate money. The new Arizona Charitable Tax Credit allows for individuals to donate \$400 and couples \$800 (firstfoodbank.org/az-tax-credit-donations-online). And, St. Mary’s has a planned giving officer for bequests.

Volunteers are always needed, both individually and by group. Last year, 90,000 volunteer spots were filled; 370,000 hours resulted.

Needs are always growing, and St. Mary’s is always considering what/ifs. If SNAP benefits, for example, are reduced just 10 percent, Kertis says that St. Mary’s will have to find 37 million more pounds of food annually. “The folks who need it will turn to the food banks.”

“A lot of people are thinking that because the economy has gotten better, people aren’t suffering hunger,” he adds. “But real income has been going down for years, and large disparities exist. The working poor still suffer.”

To alleviate this, the Knight Center distribution center is now open Wednesday night until 7 p.m.

“Almost half of the families who come to the food bank have at least one family member who is employed,” Kertis says. “We’ve extended our hours so that people who are working during the day can still have access to food — if their paychecks aren’t covering the cost of food at home.”

For more information, see [StMarysFoodBank.org](http://StMarysFoodBank.org) or call 602.242.FOOD.



### Top 10 Ways to: FIGHT HUNGER IN ARIZONA

1. Volunteer
2. Host a Food Drive
3. Launch a Virtual Food Drive
4. Provide Food Backpacks to Kids
5. Join the Super Saturday Turkey Drive
6. Distribute Thanksgiving Meal Items
7. Include St. Mary’s in Workplace Giving Campaign
8. Launch an Internal Fundraising Event
9. Provide Matching Gifts Opportunities
10. Offer Volunteer Grants (Dollars for Doers)

Learn more and get involved:  
[CorporateGiving@FirstFoodBank.org](mailto:CorporateGiving@FirstFoodBank.org)  
 or 602.343.2548  
[www.StMarysFoodBank.org](http://www.StMarysFoodBank.org)



### FY 2015/2016 YEAR IN REVIEW FACT SHEET

#### Food Resourcing Top 10 Retail Rescue Partners

Walmart:	5,849,363 Pounds
Fry’s:	1,787,526 Pounds
Safeway:	1,513,987 Pounds
Sprouts:	1,411,375 Pounds
Sam’s Club:	1,164,763 Pounds
Target:	908,900 Pounds
Trader Joe’s:	737,912 Pounds
Albertsons:	648,292 Pounds
Bashas’:	303,697 Pounds
Haggen:	196,527 Pounds

#### Distribution

Overall	73,972,431 Pounds Distributed
Fresh Produce	21,585,509 Pounds Distributed
Turkeys	20,505 Distributed for Holidays

474 Agency Partners managing 670  
 Total Food Distribution Programs