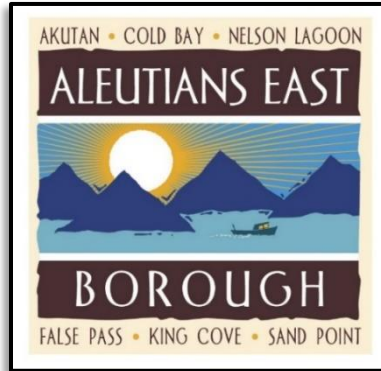


# In the Loop



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## **Aleutians East Borough's Food Distribution Program Provides a Much-needed Boost during the Holidays**



Borough staff members and volunteers pick up meat boxes at the city dock warehouse.

With COVID-19 cases on the rise over the holidays, many people modified their 2020 celebration plans last month. For some, that meant making do with less. The seafood industry as a whole was hit hard by restaurant closures, social distancing protocols and the need for safety measures as a result of the pandemic. Hunker down mandates also had economic ripple effects throughout the region as well as across the state. In addition, commercial fishermen struggled with lower prices for salmon.

“If you look at salmon alone, we’re at

probably 50% of last year's income," said Aleutians East Borough Mayor Alvin Osterback.

Few would argue that 2020 was a tough year. After the Borough provided stimulus funds and other grant programs to those who qualified, the AEB Administration and the Assembly discussed additional ways to help households in the region with remaining CARES Act funds. During a recent visit to the grocery store, Mayor Osterback saw two women in the meat section looking at packages of steak, which sparked an idea.

"I was thinking maybe we should provide meat boxes," he said. "That's probably one of the most expensive things to buy in the bush."

So, in the holiday spirit of giving, the Aleutians East Borough initiated its food distribution program in December. Staff members and volunteers worked tirelessly to make the holidays a little brighter during an otherwise challenging season. Boxes of food containing an array of chicken, pork and beef products were sent to Akutan, Nelson Lagoon, False Pass, Sand Point, King Cove and Cold Bay. Gift cards/store credit for food retailers were also provided to households within the Borough.

In Sand Point, after obtaining a list of currently-occupied households, a group of eight Borough staff members and volunteers met the freighter at the city dock, as harbormaster Douglas Holmberg controlled access. Staff and volunteers checked off vehicles as they were receiving boxes. Staff and volunteers included Borough Assembly Member Denise Mobeck, AEB Clerk/Planner Tina Anderson, Borough Maintenance Director Emil Mobeck, Christian Anderson-Nutt, Jonni Pilcher, Jack Jaeger and his stepson, Deven Osterback.



Borough Assembly Member Denise Mobeck, AEB Maintenance Director Emil Mobeck and other volunteers bring meat boxes to household members lined up in vehicles on the city dock.

"There was a line of vehicles all the way back to the first gear shed. We had a fairly good flow of cars," Anderson said.

Assembly Member Denise Mobeck handed out the gift certificates. Volunteers Dennis and Rayette McGlashan delivered boxes and gift certificates to elders. Overall, assisting with this effort was rewarding for those involved.

“It made me feel really good,” said Emil Mobeck. “It was nice to be part of this and helping people in need.”



(From left to right) Volunteer Jonni Pilcher, Borough Clerk/Planner Tina Anderson and volunteer Christian Anderson-Nutt check off household members from a list as vehicles drive by to pick up meat boxes.

“There are a lot of people who are struggling to make ends meet,” Anderson said. “Providing them with groceries, and meat boxes, which are very expensive here, was really appreciated. It was awesome to be part of that.”

In King Cove, staff members and volunteers, joined forces for a similar effort, picking up the meat boxes from the freighter at the dock and setting up a drive-through style distribution center at the old school parking lot. Staff members and volunteers included Borough Accounting Clerk Jacki Brandell, Lonnie Brandell, Assembly member Chris Babcock, Nelson Brandell, Jaden Brandell, Carisa Brandell, Waylon

Brandell and Brennen Larsen. Cars looped around to pick up boxes and gift certificates.

“Everybody was very appreciative and thankful,” said Jacki Brandell.

“I was able to see almost everyone in town – people who I haven’t seen in months (due to the pandemic). I really enjoyed that.”

In Cold Bay, AEB Terminal Manager Kurt Uttecht picked up the meat boxes from the airport after they arrived via Alaska Airlines. He and Howie Walcott delivered them to households throughout the community.

“We’re all very grateful,” said Cold Bay Mayor Harold (Hap) Kremer.

Kerri Newman delivered the gift cards to Cold Bay households a couple of weeks later. Uttecht said everything went very well.

In Akutan, the Borough Airport Operations Assistant Hugh Pelkey picked up and delivered the meat boxes to households throughout the community. Akutan Corporation Manager April Pelkey worked with the Borough to provide store credit for households at the McGlashan store.

“We kept a list,” April Pelkey said. “I did a separate individual store account under each

household's name for grocery items. A lot of people were happy.”

False Pass Mayor Nikki Hoblet and her partner, Rey Vega, met Precision Air at the airport when the meat boxes arrived, filling up the back of their truck.

“We drove around town and handed them out, house by house,” Hoblet said. “They were pretty heavy. There was a lot of meat. Everyone was very excited and thankful.”

When the boxes arrived at the Nelson Lagoon airport, Assembly member Samantha McNeley and Angela Johnson loaded them in a truck and delivered them to households throughout town. McNeley said for some people, receiving the boxes was an emotional experience.

“We opened one of them up to show them what they were getting, and they were almost in tears because it was so unexpected,” she said. “They were very thankful, and couldn’t believe they were getting this box.”

McNeley said many people in Nelson Lagoon started cooking some of meat later that evening.

“People couldn’t wait to have some of their food,” McNeley said. “They haven’t had meat like that in a while.”

To date, the Borough spent about \$887,000 on the food distribution program to help make sure families and individuals could enjoy delicious meals over the holidays.

“Overall, we’re proud that the program was successful,” said Borough Administrator Anne Bailey, “and we hope that it really helped households within the Borough.”

“I think people were really happy about it,” Mayor Osterback said. “It was great to have the Assembly and staff involved with this program to get it done.”

The Borough allocated finances to a variety of other programs with CARES ACT funding. The AEB spent \$467,964 on the Borough’s Emergency Assistance & Economic Stimulus grant program. In addition, The Borough also disbursed \$100,000 on its Non-Profit Civic Organization program grant to help offset the negative economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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