St. Peter’s Fleet Providing Both Jobs & Hunger Relief

From early on in our COVID-19 Relief Fund work two things were clear: with the Keys closed to the visitors that fuel the economy, unemployment was through the roof and nonprofits were overwhelmed and struggling to meet the exponential increase in demand for their services. We put two and two together and saw potential to make it a win-win, putting the word out to our non-profit partners that we were seeking projects to put the unemployed back to work helping charities to meet the unprecedented need.

At the same time, food for hunger relief efforts became increasingly unavailable. I was hearing from the food pantries we work with that not only had regular donations from grocers stopped, they could not even buy what they needed to provide nutritious meals at full price. I saw article after article about how critical parts of the Keys economy, particularly the charter fishing industry already on the ropes from Hurricane Irma, were now in danger of collapsing.

That’s where the Star of the Sea (SOS) Foundation answered our call with a solution that neatly addresses all these issues called St. Peter’s Fleet, named for the patron saint of fishermen. The St. Peter’s Fleet project, which has been running as a successful pilot program and is in the process of expanding, is putting a total of 50 unemployed fishermen back to work full-time providing high quality protein to hunger relief efforts Keys-wide. The jobs include 10 captains, 29 mates and 11 to process and distribute the fish to food pantries.

"The wheels of State grind slowly and funding for the wages portion of this program has taken months from the original concept to help get these fishermen back out on the water," according to SOS Executive Director Tom Callahan. "It was only with Ocean Reef Community Foundation’s support that SOS had the confidence to self-fund the pilot program that proved the concept, ensuring funding for the wages."

Indeed, the project took the cooperation of so many to come together that I think of it as a bit of miracle. The Florida State Fish & Wildlife Commission has revised fishing regulations in support of this program. Local fish houses and marinas throughout the Keys have volunteered space and help to process the fish to ensure safe handling. For the first time ever, CareerSource South Florida is hiring and funding jobs in the fishing industry and is bringing more than $1 million to the table. The fishermen are on board, happy to be fishing and helping to feed their neighbors. Strapped food programs are receiving thousands of pounds of fresh fish to feed families in need at no cost.

If a perfect storm were a good thing, it would be St. Peter’s Fleet.

The project has been a collaboration on our end, too. The COVID-19 Relief funding for this project -- which is paying expenses including fuel, bait and ice for 10 boats to go out everyday -- was matched 100 percent by our Lovett-Woodsum Donor Advised Fund. Add to that all the Members who donated to our COVID-19 Relief effort and the fact that all their donations were matched by a private donor and there are more wins here than I can count.

Join us in supporting relief efforts like these for Monroe County and Homestead and have your gift matched dollar for dollar. Donate at ofound.org or mail your check made payable to Ocean Reef Community Foundation, with "COVID-19 Relief" in the memo line, to 35 Ocean Reef Drive, Ste. 148, Key Largo, FL 33037. Questions? Please email foundation@oceanreef.com.