

## As shortage continues, a D.C. charity fills fridges with free formula



Behind the refrigerator's glass door Mark Bucher saw a single 8-ounce bottle of Similac baby formula. It was 9:30 a.m. at the Glassmanor Community Center in Prince George's County. The fridge had been filled once this morning with formula, Bucher said, and this was all that was left a few hours later.

"These bottles individually are like \$4," Bucher said as he propped open the fridge door and began placing bottles inside from a new Similac 24-pack. "It's expensive. And if you don't have SNAP benefits, that's \$16 a day to feed your kid, roughly speaking. That's stressful." The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program provides benefits to needy families to purchase food.

Whatever anxieties typically hound parents about their newborn's eating habits are likely now spiking to scary new heights, in the Washington region and beyond.

Product recalls and supply chain delays have created an unprecedented shortage in baby formula. Parents have clamored for solutions. Manufacturers have made assurances. The White House has taken action. But families everywhere are still facing the frightening possibility of not being able to feed their kids. It's a crisis that has particularly affected those struggling below the poverty line.

*[U.S. baby formula shortage leaves parents scrambling]*

"The dirty little secret is a lot of this stuff, the ready-to-drink bottles, you can't buy on SNAP benefits," Bucher said. "People have been trying to get those [in power] to just make it SNAP-eligible. But they can't move that quickly."

But speed and entrepreneurial can-do is what Bucher has been trying to throw at pressing social concerns since the coronavirus pandemic hit.  
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A co-owner of the D.C.-based Medium Rare restaurant group, Bucher in summer 2020 set up Feed the Fridge, a network of refrigerators stocked daily with fresh meals put together by area restaurants. By January 2022, the nonprofit organization had served more than 500,000 meals while being fully funded through donations. "There's no qualifications. No data collection. Just food," Bucher said.

The Glassmanor fridge Bucher was stocking with formula had opened a few weeks earlier, one of 14 Feed the Fridge locations being filled each day. Like the others, the Glassmanor location in Oxon Hill was chosen because it sits in a food desert, he said, five miles from the closest supermarket.

"This one is filled with \$600 worth of meals each day," he said. "One hundred meals and we pay the restaurants \$6."

When the baby formula shortage went into overdrive in the past few weeks, Bucher realized Feed the Fridge's locations offered an already existing infrastructure he could use to get the coveted product to disadvantaged families.

He had found a unique way to source the formula two weeks before at a reunion of his Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity brothers from American University. Bucher said he asked them to look around at home for stray formula on store shelves, especially if they lived in parts of Florida with a preponderance of senior citizens.

*[Baby formula plant may be open within a week, FDA commissioner says]*

"That gives me about a hundred-person network around the country," he said. "We're scouring in places with older people like Pinellas, Dade and Broward counties in Florida. We get pallets every day in from around the country."

That effort, combined with local formula drives and donations, Bucher said, means Feed the Fridge has 100,000 bottles of formula to be spread across the region. The formula giveaway, however, isn't going to stop when the shortage inevitably ends.

Over the past 2½ years, while Bucher has been thinking about Feed the Fridge, he considered hungry families and hungry seniors, but never hungry babies, he said. Formula was a blind spot.

"So we're going to try to find the funding to put formula in the fridges every day," he said.

Jacoline Key, a longtime Glassmanor resident and president of the community association, said the fridge has been of benefit to the community spectrum. "I have a young girl that lives in my neighborhood, and she just had a baby. I took her some formula," Key said. "I also have a few seniors near me that don't come out. So I do come up and get maybe three or four meals at a time for them."

A few hours after Bucher pulled out, as the lunch hour approached and children's voices could be heard from recess at the elementary school next to the community center, a middle-aged woman pulled into the parking lot.

Quickly stepping to the fridge, she filled her arms with eight bottles of formula.

"For my daughter's baby," said Beverly, who declined to give her full name for privacy reasons. "My grandbaby."

The child was 2 weeks old. "My daughter has been trying to breastfeed but she's having trouble with the baby latching," she said. "So we have been using formula, too."

The family has given up on trying to find formula at stores, she said. Instead, they mostly check online, but the prices had been high or the product sold out. The eight 8-oz. bottles she had would last three days, she thought.

"It's a peace of mind," she said before leaving. "I thank the Lord."

By early afternoon, there would be only one formula bottle left in the Glassmanor fridge.