

Beyond the Dais Podcast: Episode 4 – An Interview with Solid Rock Community Development Corporation

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Scott Anderson: This is Scott Anderson. I am the Communications and Public Relations Manager for El Paso County. And today I'm here with Ben Anderson, the Executive Director of Solid Rock Community Development Corporation. Ben, thank you for having me today. I appreciate the time.

Ben Anderson: Thank you, Scott. Appreciate it. Yes.

Scott: So, I wanted to come and talk to you a little bit about Solid Rock and the funding that you guys were able to receive from the ARPA grant. But first off, can you share a bit of background about Solid Rock, how long have you guys been in El Paso County, and what your main mission is?

Ben: Solid Rock Community Development Corporation has been in El Paso County or specifically southeast Colorado Springs since 2016 and we primarily serve zip codes 80910 and 80916, which is probably the most challenging area of our city.

Scott: And how many people do you serve within that community about?

Ben: Within that community is approximately 75- to 80,000 residents.

Scott: Wow, all right. After submitting your grant request to the county, Solid Rock was awarded \$250,000 of ARPA funding. Can you talk to me about what that money is going to fund?

Ben: You know Scott, when we first opened the food pantry in 2020, probably the first part of 2020, just prior to COVID, we were probably serving maybe 2- to 300 residents a month. Currently we are serving over 1200 residents a month, so the need for food access has greatly increased, and we are probably the largest food source in terms of pantry in Southeast Colorado Springs. So, one of the other things that we've tried to do also, is how do we support our farmers who are also having challenging times as well with their produce. And so, these dollars have helped us to not only increase the food inventory, but we've also been able to help farmers where we pay farmers for their produce and then we hold farmer markets here in Southeast Colorado Springs, and we give away that produce free to our residents. So, we've been – those dollars not only help the operations of the food pantry, but they also support farmers and also we can provide free food to our residents.

Scott: That's wonderful. And speaking of those farmers, can you talk to me a little bit more about those farmers markets and you know what that looks like out in the community.

Ben: So, we generally hold – this year we're holding four farmers markets and they're all free to residents, and we are averaging probably 400-500 residents on a Saturday for our free farmers market. And so, we have the farmers who bring their produce to the market, and we have vendors there, we have food trucks. So, we make it an event for our community. We hold one per month and they've been very, very successful. But the outcome is to see, you know, our residents receiving free food that is fresh because the farmers bring it in. And it has been just a very, very successful event that we hold.

Scott: That's wonderful. Can you talk to me about how important it is for Solid Rock to be a pillar within this community here in Southeast Colorado Springs?

Ben: Yeah, I, you know, I pride myself and our team on the fact that we are a pillar in this community and there are other initiatives that we address. We address affordable housing. We are currently building 77 units of affordable housing. It's called The Village at Solid Rock. So that's another, you know, initiative that we address. We address small business development. How do we support our small businesses here in Southeast Colorado Springs, and how do we you know increase employment for our residents? So those are things that I think are very vital to the economic development of a community. And one of the other things that we've just done is we've purchased a commercial property that we're going to build a commercial retail center in the center of Southeast Colorado Springs.

Scott: I'd like it if you could tell me a personal story of someone who has been able to benefit from your services, and maybe if you don't have a specific person in mind, something that you've been able to witness and see for yourself – the change that Solid Rock has been able to bring to someone.

Ben: Yeah, you know we have- once a month we hold a drive-thru for our residents, and the drive-thru is a where we give away food. And now, you know, we couldn't do the work we do without Care and Share. Care and Share is a- is huge in the support of what Solid Rock does in terms of food access. So, they support us on our drive-thru. But generally, we do the second Friday of every month we have a drive-thru, and we probably have two- to three-hundred cars. We just held it last Friday and we had 250 cars in line. But, you know, the satisfaction is when you have your community and you put food in their car, and the joy that they have by saying, "thank you all so very, very much for the work you do" is very rewarding. So, it's not as if, you know, we have to- certainly there are many testimonials that people could and do give us, but just the joy of serving our community and the respect that our community gives us in saying thank you for the work you do. So, it's very rewarding and it's something that we try to do the best service that we can when we have our drive-thru events, but even when our

residents come into the food pantry and shop for food, it's always a space of gratitude and thankfulness that our community provides to us.

Scott: Right now, I feel there's a lot more need in the community than there has been maybe in years past. Certainly, with hangover effects from COVID pandemic still lingering, inflation still being an issue, I think people who may not have needed help in the past are finding that they might be in a position that right now they do. What would you say to people who are feeling like it's difficult for them to ask for help? You know, maybe they're not used to asking for help. What would you say to those people who might need the help but have a hard time asking for it?

Ben: Great question, Scott. I, we often say this is about a hand up, not a hand out, right? How do we assist our families and how do we serve in a way that's not demeaning? And we try to exemplify that in the service that we provide. And, you know, we would love everyone to know that food is readily available and everybody from every aspect of life falls on hard times sometimes. It doesn't matter who you are. And so, we realized that we have many demographics of individuals who come through our food pantry and our drive-thru that maybe a year ago would not have thought about coming to a food pantry or food market or drive-thru.

Scott: Lastly, I would say for those who aren't in that situation, for those who are doing well but want to give back, you know they want to find ways to help out – how can people get involved with Solid Rock and where can they go to find out some more information?

Ben: Those individuals can certainly- we always need donations to support our food initiative here in Southeast. And you can go to our Facebook page or our website solidrockcdc.com, or our Facebook page which is Solid Rock Community Development Corporation. You can donate that way. Other areas is just volunteering and you know getting in touch on the website and signing up to volunteer. We always need volunteers to assist us in helping the community.

Scott: Wonderful. And then I just want to offer you an opportunity – is there anything else you'd like to add, anything else you want to share about Solid Rock?

Ben: I appreciate the collaboration that we have with multiple partners. In the city and El Paso County Health, primarily, has been a great support of Solid Rock Community Development Corporation the past five years. So, we appreciate the work that El Paso County Health is doing, and we certainly look forward to working together with them in the future.

Scott: Thank you very much.

Ben: Thank you.