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## How Amazon is helping its HQ2 community amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Amazon is partnering with local restaurants to deliver 10,000 meals to essential care workers and vulnerable populations.

By Day One Staff  
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For the past 19 years, [Freddie's Beach Bar and Restaurant](#) has been a favorite local hangout for residents and vacationers alike in Arlington, Virginia. The bar, located on a section of 23<sup>rd</sup> Street dubbed "Restaurant Row" in Crystal City's eclectic west side, is one of a kind with fuchsia, aqua, and day-glo purple walls decorated with a collage of Barbie dolls, pink flamingos, and found objects rescued from dumpsters.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, people flocked to Freddie's for Saturday night drag shows, drag bingo on Wednesdays, and Sunday champagne brunch buffet complete with Belgian waffles, fried plantains, sushi, and carved roast beef.

Freddie Lutz, owner of the bar, with his signature bushy mustache and dry wit, is perhaps as much of a draw as the bar's fun atmosphere and friendly crowd. An Arlington native who grew up in a house just up the hill from his eponymous gathering spot, he works passionately to promote the rights of the LGBTQ community.

Despite Freddie's loyal following, the pandemic hit the business fast and hard. "At first, we tried to stay open for carryout and delivery, but we quickly realized we were losing money by doing that," said Lutz. "The extent of the toll it took on our business really hit home when we had bills coming in, but no money to pay them."

Lutz canceled utilities like linen service and trash pickup, and he asked his landlord for a break on rent. As he shuttered the restaurant, he was forced to lay off nearly all of his 40 full- and part-time staffers. "Some of our employees were able to find other work, but others were freaking out," Lutz says. With no end to the pandemic in sight, Lutz needed nothing short of a miracle to keep Freddie's afloat.

### 10,000 meals, delivered

In late April, Amazon called Lutz. "They told me they loved Freddie's Beach Bar and wanted to partner with us to deliver 10,000 meals to essential care workers and vulnerable populations," Lutz said. "I was thrilled, and one waiter even cried when I told him the news."

By early May, Freddie's was churning out more than 400 meals a day—from pesto chicken fettucine to meatloaf, salads to turkey sandwiches. Due to the massive size of the order, Lutz enlisted a dozen other restaurants on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street to help.

It was an extremely nimble, creative, and generous response by Amazon—the scale and speed were remarkable," said Tracy Sayegh Gabriel, president and executive director of the Crystal City Business Improvement District (BID). Crystal City BID provided compostable packaging and boxed water to accompany the meals, furthering a long-standing effort to promote a sustainable neighborhood.

"This feel-good effort has breathed life, energy, and activity into the independent restaurants that make up the core of 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, while also serving people on the front lines and those in greatest need," Gabriel said.

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*Freddie Lutz - owner of Freddie's Beach Bar and Restaurant*

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### **More than a free meal**

One organization that received meals from Amazon is the Virginia Hospital Center (VHC), a 394-bed teaching hospital in Arlington. "After nine intensive weeks of caring for COVID-19 patients, our staff was showing signs of wear and tear," said Adrian Stanton, VHC's vice president of business development and community relationships. "I was amazed by how quickly Amazon jumped in to support us."

Stanton stresses that the outreach meant more than simply a free meal. "As one staff member said, 'We know we've got folks on the outside who support what we're doing here on the inside.' Everyone had masks on, but you could still see smiles in their eyes."

Amazon also donated meals to the Arlington County Fire Department, which employs 330 firefighters and EMTs, many of whom have been personally impacted by the pandemic. Following a suspected COVID-19 exposure in his unit, Captain Justin Tirelli, public information officer and staff assistant to the fire chief, was quarantined for 14 days. "My daughter is 11 months old and I can't pick her up, give her a hug, or feed her," he said.

The fire department has been deeply moved by Amazon's response and having the support of the entire community has impacted the team's performance. "I wasn't expecting anything. I signed up for this; it's my job," Tirelli said. "But knowing that we don't have to take this on alone—that we're all in it together—helps us keep our focus and drive during this stressful time."

"The fire station is our second home, and our team is like a second family," he said. "The generosity of Amazon and others shows us that our little family here at the station is part of a big family. And when you have a crisis like this, you can turn to people you love and trust."

For Lutz, the most striking aspect of the project is the gratitude that first responders like EMTs and hospital employees express. "They are so thankful, which is incredibly humbling," Lutz said. "I tell them they don't need to thank us—they are the ones who deserve thanks for doing the hard work and putting their lives on the line every day."



### **Bringing community back**

Amazon's outreach also includes delivering meals to neighbors in need. "Food insecurity is the greatest initial concern our residents experience during the pandemic," said Cheryl Ramp, director of community relations for Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH), a nonprofit organization providing low-cost homes to more than 3,500 residents. APAH has seen a 40% increase in people coming to food pantry distributions at their properties, and a 450% rise in households that need to have groceries delivered to their door by staff or volunteers.

"The many residents who work in service industries lost their jobs or had their hours reduced, meaning families already living on the edge had little to no income to spend on food," Ramp said. "For seniors and other vulnerable households, the fear of going out and potentially becoming ill is real and rising—people are simply too afraid to go to the grocery store."

While APAH's immediate focus has been supplying residents with groceries, a restaurant meal is a special treat. Amazon delivered a hot dinner for each family member, plus a cold boxed lunch for the next day. "After the delivery, we received a note from one resident saying, 'Thank you Amazon for the dinner today, and God bless you,'" said Celia Slater, communications manager for the nonprofit affordable housing developer AHC, which has more than 3,000 apartments in Arlington.

"Like all of us sheltering at home, a delicious, prepared meal nourishes the body and lifts the spirit," said APAH CEO Nina Janopaul. "And when the support also helps local restaurants—well, that's a win-win-win."

### **A return to the beach**

As for Lutz, Amazon's meal donation has given him the opportunity to open Freddie's doors, once again. "Amazon has been such a fabulous neighbor, and to be able to share this project with them is amazing," Lutz said. "It has helped us segue into a careful phased opening."

Freddie's now offers curbside pickup and meal delivery—and in his typical outside-the-box fashion, Lutz even set up tables in the parking lot to serve diners. With any luck, it won't be long before the restaurant is back to normal.