

Soulcial Kitchen, Leadership Council announce 'Currency of Caring' partnership

The Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois announced it is partnering with Soulcial Kitchen in Swansea and its Currency of Caring program to provide 200 free, hot restaurant quality meals for the men and women serving at Scott Air Force Base who may be experiencing insufficient access to nutritious food. Food insecurity is a major concern throughout the country, including here in our region. Unfortunately it also impacts some service members stationed at Scott Air Force Base, which is why the Leadership Council is getting involved and encouraging its membership to do the same.

The Currency of Caring program is a simple way of making a tangible difference in someone's life who may be dealing with food insecurity or other related hardships. The not-for-profit program allows anyone to purchase a "meal token" for \$8, which is then provided to someone who needs it. The recipient can exchange this prepaid meal token at a participating food preparer (restaurant or food truck) for an entree, side, and drink - no questions asked. This new partnership between the Leadership Council and Soulcial Kitchen will provide an initial 200 free meal tokens to the Leadership at Scott Air Force Base to distribute to any service members who may need them, with a goal of keeping the program going for as long as it is necessary.

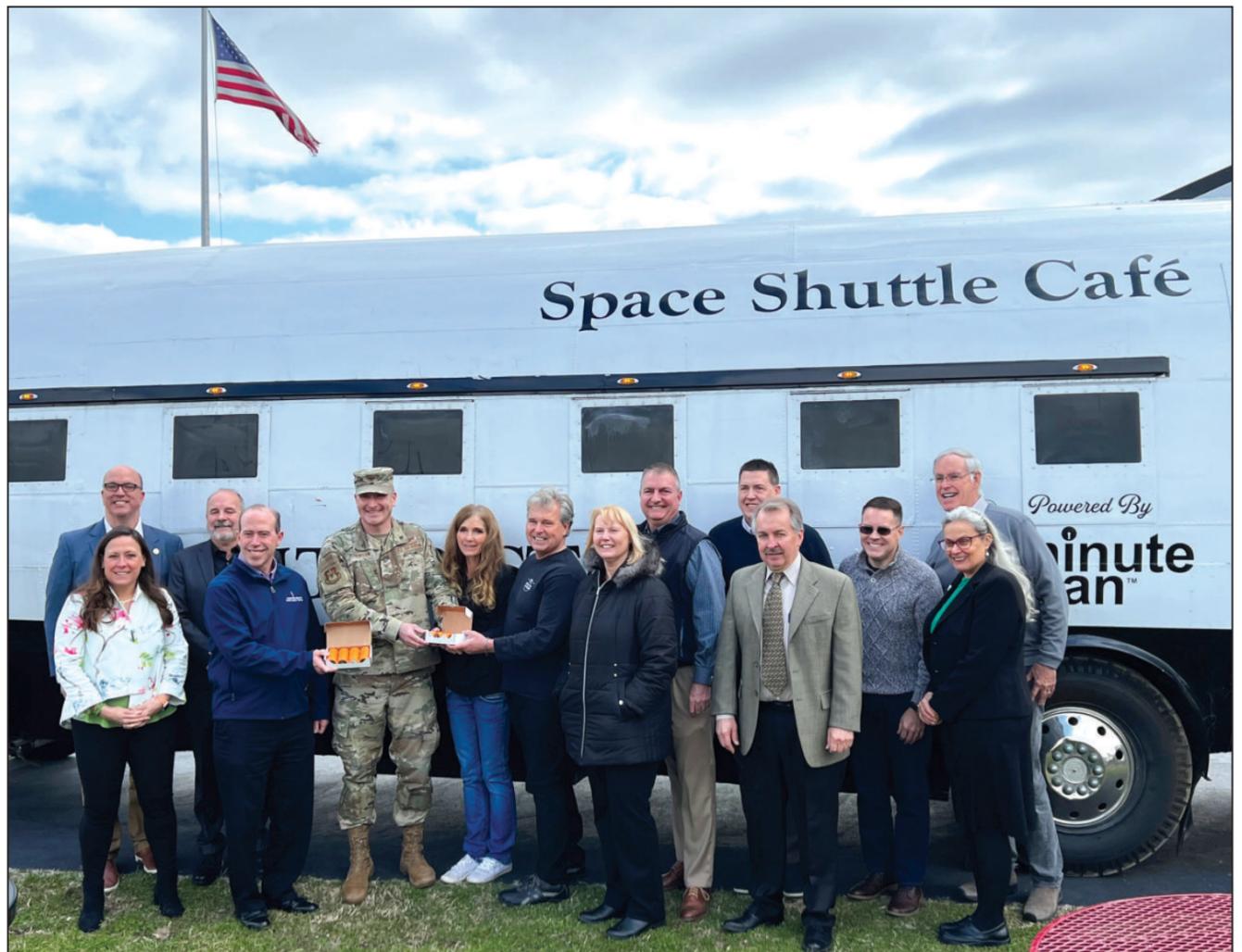
"We have fantastic, supportive community members who provide assistance to our Airmen in many ways, and this is a good example of the partnerships that we have in the Greater Scott Community," said Col. Chris Robinson, 375th Air Mobility Wing and Installation Commander. "Our Airmen will appreciate this gesture, and we thank the businesses and the private donors who are making this happen."

"Having served as the former Commander of Scott AFB, I certainly empathize with the variety of needs facing some of our military members and/or their families," said retired Air Force Col. Scot Heathman. "To get after problems like food insecurity and/or health and wellness matters, with actionable solutions, is priceless. I have faith and confidence that programs like the 'Currency of Caring' can go a long way to meet some of these needs while bringing the military and civilian community together in a way that's extremely positive. I also believe it will help reduce the stigmatism sometimes attached to asking or receiving support," Col. Heathman added.

"Our goal with the Currency of Caring is simple," Soulcial Kitchen founder John Michel shared. "Make it easy to connect and bless people through great food; so together, we can build stronger, more resilient communities while caring for those who may be struggling. Our hope is that this effort to support our precious Airmen and their families in need at Scott Air Force Base will only be the first in Air Mobility Command, and maybe one day, even the entire Department of Defense," Michel added. Learn more about the program at www.CurrencyOfCaring.com.

Soulcial Kitchen is a 2.5-acre hospitality park in Swansea featuring a restaurant and bar, food truck park, dog park, and soon to launch crepe and ice cream parlor. It was founded by Brigadier General (Ret.) John E. Michel and award-winning artist Holly Michel to enhance community connection and serve the under-served through the Currency of Caring dignified dining program.

The Leadership Council has been the premier organization fostering economic growth in Southwestern Illinois since 1983. Through its membership and multiple committees, the council strives to unite the region for growth, serving Madison, St. Clair, Macoupin, Clinton, Monroe, Jersey, Bond, Washington, and Calhoun Counties.



Leadership Council partners gathered for a photo op at Soulcial Kitchen on Mar. 14, 2023, as they delivered 200 food tokens to Col. Chris Robinson from Scott AFB. Pictured, from left, are Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois (LCSWIL) Executive Director Kyle Anderson, Scott Spouses' Club President Amanda Reeder, Mascoutah Mayor Pat McMahan, LCSWIL President and Millenia Professional Services Vice President Gary Hoelscher, 375th Air Mobility Wing & Installation Commander Col. Chris Robinson, Soulcial Kitchen Founder Holly Michel, Soulcial Kitchen Founder and U.S. Air Force Retired Brigadier General John Michel, St. Louis Federal Executive Board Executive Director Anita Leach, The Korte Company Director of Client Relations Jay Korte, Scott Air Force Base Military & Family Readiness Center Employment Program Manager Scott Raether, Shiloh Mayor Bob Weilmuenster, Elevating Others Founder/Owner and U.S. Air Force (375th Air Mobility Wing & Installation Commander) Retired Colonel J. Scot Heathman, Airlift/Tanker Association and U.S. Air Force Retired Major General Tom Kane, and Friends of Fisher House St. Louis Executive Director Laura Neuman-Howe.

Steelworkers union could block sale of Granite City mill

Union president says the sale can't go forward without the union's consent

By ELIZABETH DONALD
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St. Louis/Southern Illinois Labor Tribune

The proposed sale of the Granite City steel mill could eliminate at least 1,000 jobs – but not without the union's consent.

Dan Simmons, president of United Steelworkers Local 1899, said that without the union's approval, the deal to sell the two blast furnaces to SunCoke can't go forward. That's because there's a clause in the union's contract that gives them a seat at the negotiating table, and Simmons believes they can block the sale.

U.S. Steel, which owns the Granite City plant, announced last summer that it intends to sell two blast furnaces to SunCoke Energy Inc. SunCoke would then alter the furnaces to produce pig iron, a crude material for making steel. U.S. Steel would still supply raw materials and then would buy back 100 percent of the product, but SunCoke would handle the production facility – with one-third of the workforce.

"We want U.S. Steel to make this investment, not a third party," Simmons said. "It's not a done deal and it's a live issue."

The negotiations were delayed a bit while the national union contract was negotiated in the fall. The contract was settled December 2022 and runs to September 2026, with 92 percent of U.S. Steel's employees voting in favor. The contract includes a 21 percent raise over four years and maintains health care and pensions, which Simmons said was the best contract he'd ever been associated with bargaining.

A theory but no explanation

But as to the sale, the negotiation sessions have been less progressive. Each meeting has ended with no resolution or solid explanation as to why U.S. Steel is bringing in SunCoke, Simmons said – though he has his own theories that by dividing

the production chain with SunCoke, U.S. Steel can give the impression of lowering its carbon footprint, but the company has denied that they are "greenwashing" their operations.

U.S. Steel is in solid condition lately, with stock prices up 35 percent over the last three months, according to Forbes. But negotiations on the deal have not progressed.

"There's no status, we are no further than we were," Simmons said. "We kind of kicked that can down the road... Everybody wants to know definitive answers, and we don't have that."

Simmons said he has met with U.S. Steel and SunCoke, with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and other legislators, and will meet with U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth and new U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski in coming weeks.

Will have to be approved by steelworkers

Ultimately, the sale and restructuring of the plant will have to be approved by the steelworkers, Simmons said. "It's not a done deal, it's up in the air, and my goal is to try to get U.S. Steel to make this investment with the least impact to the employees and the community," he said.

But workers are disheartened, and the rumor mill is running wild.

"Sometimes we make more rumors than we do steel," Simmons said. "The morale is terrible and it's causing people to leave here prematurely, looking for other work."

U.S. Steel purchased the Granite City plant from National Steel following the latter's bankruptcy in 2003. The mill has been in operation since 1878, making sheet iron and switching to steel in 1895.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This story has been reprinted with permission from St. Louis/Southern Illinois Labor Tribune, where it was first published on Mar. 6, 2023.)