

# Ford's self-driving cars are delivering food and supplies to families in Dade

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For the past two months, 50 Miami-Dade County Public Schools families have been receiving fresh greens and school supplies via an unlikely source: self-driving cars.

Even as the pandemic has raged, the Ford Motor Company's autonomous-vehicles division and its technology partner, Argo AI, have continued the program that they began nearly three years ago to test self-driving vehicles in Miami-Dade. Ford recently announced it was doubling down on its presence in the Magic City, revealing plans to build a new office for the test program near Miami International Airport.

In early autumn, The Education Fund, a nonprofit that supports Miami-Dade Public Schools, and Ford

decided that some of the test fleet could be put to additional use.

For years, the fund has enabled students to go home with produce harvested from its Food Forest program, which teaches hands-on production of edible gardens at public-school locations across the county. After pandemic concerns pushed many students to online learning, the fund looked for ways to safely provide supplies to students and their families.

In stepped Ford — a longtime Ed Fund board member — and Argo. Since October, Ford and Argo have used their autonomous test fleet to make contact-less deliveries of food and supplies to families and students who depend on distance learning. Since then, about 500 deliveries have been made. The testing phase still requires a safety staffer in each vehicle, but the technology now

allows the staffer's hands to be held above the steering wheel — meaning there are indeed cars driving by themselves on Miami-Dade roads these days.

For Ford, it's another step in its race toward deploying a fully autonomous delivery and transportation capabilities sometime in 2022.

"We're going to be moving people and goods," said Alex Buznego, Miami Market Manager at Ford Autonomous Vehicles LLC. "This pilot allows us to do some good for our neighbors while helping accomplish our own objectives."

In particular, the food and supplies drop-offs help test the autonomous vehicles' abilities to navigate different types of neighborhoods, he said.

"We're driving to single family homes, condos, apartments — and each has its own nuances that an AV has to navigate safely and con-



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Leonarys Jardine picks up a bag of fresh greens and school supplies that were delivered by an autonomous vehicle on Española Way in Miami Beach on Tuesday.

sistently," he said. "Practicing how they handle those environments is an important part to developing this business model."

Miami Beach resident Leonarys Jardine, 42, and her children Isabella, 12, and Julio, 10, have been receiving drop-offs. She welcomes both the healthy, fresh varieties of greens that might otherwise be too expensive

— and the arrival of the autonomous vehicles.

"We'll be able to use the time we drive for other things," she said in Spanish.

She also said of the program: "[My children] are able to get access to what they'd otherwise be getting at school."

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