

‘Our mission is clear’: MAHN summit brings people together to talk solutions for hunger, food insecurity



MontCo Anti-Hunger Network Executive Director Amanda Musselman speaks during a Hunger Action Summit on Sept. 21, 2023 at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell. (Rachel Ravina – MediaNews Group)

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BLUE BELL — MontCo Anti-Hunger Network [Executive Director Amanda Musselman](#) approached the podium during last week’s Hunger Action Summit with a purpose.

She hoped to revive the age-old tradition of bringing people together to expand on the nonprofit’s mission of finding actionable solutions to the area’s [food insecurity crisis](#).

“Our mission is clear: By leading coordinated action, MontCo Anti-Hunger Network strengthens the Montgomery County food safety net system,” she said. “Moving forward, MAHN remains committed to breaking down barriers, sharing resources and uniting multiple agencies to fight hunger.”

Around 70 people attended the day-long event held on Sept. 21 at Montgomery County Community College's Blue Bell campus. Along with those in the nonprofit space, other participants included area residents, food providers, nonprofit leaders, local government officials, business owners, and other community partners.

Participants of the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network's Hunger Action Summit are pictured sitting in small groups during the



morning session of Sept. 21, 2023 at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell. (Rachel Ravina – MediaNews Group)

They began the morning session by networking and engaging in discussion in small groups. While ice-breaker questions such as “What is your favorite superpower?” were asked, others got right down to the issue of hunger in the state’s second most affluent county.

“There is a misnomer that there isn’t a need in Montgomery County,” said Carmina Taylor, director of campus and community engagement at Thomas Jefferson University.

In 2022, 155,799 household visits and 64,967 individual visits were recorded to the 70 partner organizations, including food pantries, under the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network umbrella.

Preliminary figures from the summer months of 2023 show a similar increasing trend, with 10,183 households and 30,565 visits reported in May. June displayed a small drop with 9,443 households and 26,314 individuals visiting pantries in June, but upticks were revealed in July and August, with 9,202 households and 27,031 individuals, and 9,784 households and 29,603 individual visits, respectively.

Additionally, the countywide nonprofit partners with meal service providers. There were 22,859 meals served in May. June, July and August had meal service participation hovering above 12,000 for each of the summer months

“In a world filled with abundance you remember that food is a basic human right and not a privilege,” Musselman said. “Our community deserves better, and I thank you all for continuing to rise to the challenge each and every day.”

The area’s increasing food security has put a strain on local food pantries, compounded by a decrease in food-based resources, according to Musselman, who cited a lack of consistent donations and overall rising costs as the main factors for the decline.

This comes as Musselman shared findings from an early 2023 survey that revealed: “37 percent of our network was not sure they had sustainable food resources to meet the needs of their partners or they were not confident they had enough food resources to meet the needs of their community.”

Musselman touched on several key goals the organization has to further fight food insecurity:

- **Accessing nourishing food:** Design and execute a three-year plan to increase the acquisition and distribution of nutritious foods available to our network by 20 percent each.
- **Informing transformation:** through an ongoing investment in partner agencies, MAHN will gather and share knowledge, data and resources from across the county to strengthen the food safety net.
- **Powering action:** MAHN will be the recognized food resource connector in Montgomery County.



Beth Tiewater, pantry manager at the Ardmore Food Pantry, gives her perspective on the importance of food pantries providing a welcoming culture during the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network's Hunger Action Summit on Sept. 21, 2023 at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell. (Rachel Ravina – MediaNews Group)

The morning session also included a promising practices panel, featuring four food pantry leaders who shared their experiences with success. Perspectives included providing an experience, allowing for full choice shopping, drive-thru operations, and produce programs.

“In as much as we are providing food there is a need for social connection,” said Beth Tiewater, pantry manager at Ardmore Food Pantry in Ardmore, who stressed the importance of putting forth a “welcoming atmosphere” for patrons.

Rich Beyerle, pantry manager at the Willow Grove Baptist Church, emphasized how exploring partnerships with schools led to an influx of produce for the Willow Grove-based food pantry.

The “Don’t Waste Food Program” an initiative formed between the food pantry and Abington School District originated when a high school English teacher observed students throwing out fruit they received with their lunch. Since the program’s official approval, Beyerle said the food pantry has received 4,000 pounds of produce. He recommended that other food pantries use this tactic.

“Approach the school district. It’s a great resource for produce,” he said.



Panelists at the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network’s Hunger Action Summit on Sept. 21, 2023 at Montgomery County Community College’s Blue Bell campus await their turn to speak on a variety of issues relating to running area food pantries. Pictured, from left, are Jenkintown Food Cupboard Executive Director Lino Ellis, Operation 143 Executive Director Lisa Heverly and Willow Grove Baptist Church Pantry Manager Rick Beyerle. (Rachel Ravina – MediaNews Group)

In addition to the productive discussions, the summit broke participants up into “action teams,” Musselman said, designed to focus on “challenge areas.” She added groups worked on cultivating strategies and members “are going to keep meeting over the next year” to produce a “blueprint” furthering themes of “innovation” and “inclusivity.”

“It’s a journey we embark upon with the utmost determination, knowing that our collective effort can lead us to a well-nourished, hunger-free Montgomery County where all community members can flourish,” she said.