MAHN power
MontCo Anti-Hunger Network helps feed thousands

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HELPINGHANDS
ByMarian Dennis

Hunger is no small obstacle to overcome.

Tackling the issue takes a network of people working together to provide resources. That's where the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network comes in.

"We are five years old and we came out of mutual concern shared by a handful of service providers in the community that saw we were missing out on opportunities to distribute food because food pantries weren't well connected," said Paula Schafer, administrator for MontCo Anti-Hunger Network. "Food pantries were all doing their own thing and if something was too big for one pantry they were at a loss for any surplus that existed."

According to Feeding America, 9 percent of Montgomery County's residents are food insecure, amounting to about 74,000 of 826,000. The USDA defines food insecurity as "a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life."

According to the organization's website, "MontCo Anti-Hunger Network (MAHN) is an inclusive alliance of emergency food providers maximizing the acquisition and distribution of nutritious food to those in need. In conjunction with coalition building, best practice education, and advocacy, MAHN is strengthening the network supporting Montgomery County's response to hunger." The network includes four fundamental pillars that contribute to the overall mission. Those pillars include food distribution, coalition building, best practice education and advocacy.

"Distribution, our primary objective, is to increase the amount of nutritious food coming into the emergency food network and improve upon its distribution. We're doing a better job at getting to the organizations to feed hungry people," explained Schafer.

"We are doing that through our retail food rescue program. In our first year we distributed more than 100,000 pounds of food rescued from retailers that would otherwise be going into a landfill. Pantries and hungry residents get access to 100,000 pounds of food. It's a win win win all across the board," she said.

But distribution methods aren't the only tool the network uses to reach the hungry. The network also holds peer learning circles to continue education on food pantry programs and participation engagement. The group's coalition building efforts also put an emphasis on connecting area pantries so that they can share ideas and problem solve.

"By and large we operate in silos so to create this opportunity, to create this space for people to share ideas in is amazing. There are five coalition regions. We bring resources that will help enhance their programs. It's an opportunity to share ideas and do problem solving among themselves. It's a great place to be building relationships and sharing knowledge," said Schafer.

Additionally, the groups focus their attention on advocacy, which Schafer says is a key component for making the network successful.

"It is our responsibility to make sure the stories of the people we serve are heard and that we take an active role in talking with elected officials to make sure they understand what hunger looks like in their district," she said.

And the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network has done fair job of that so far. Currently, the group is coming up with new and innovative ways to advocate for the hungry. Most recently, they are working to develop ways to extend food pantries beyond their brick and mortar walls.

Food rescue volunteer John Coffey of Hatfield records program data before loading produce into MAHN's refrigerated van. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTCO ANTI-HUNGER NETWORK

Food pantry managers from across the county gather to review and discuss data from a network-wide food pantry client survey. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTCO ANTI-HUNGER NETWORK

Good partnerships yield great resources. MAHN's Retail Food Rescue Program is built on this refrigerated van awarded to them through a Philabundance sponsored grant. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTCO ANTI-HUNGER NETWORK

Produce donated by Costco Montgomeryville will help nourish families struggling to afford fresh foods. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTCO ANTI-HUNGER NETWORK

"The reason we do this because we know there are many more people who are eligible to participate in emergency food programs than are coming to our food pantries. The primary aspect is online food pantry ordering and delivery to low income seniors. These are folks who otherwise would not be able to get to a food pantry," said Schafer.

The group's hope is that eventually the program can be expanded county-wide and include more than just seniors.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network is their ability to deliver food on each pantry's terms.

"We are allowing them to take what they know they can use in a quantity they know they can distribute," explained Schafer. "This is really unique because in most retail grocer relationships the organization that's collecting is obligated to take everything the retailer has to donate. And some smaller pantries simply cannot manage that volume of food. They don't meet the criteria for these relationships. In being the middle man we can eliminate those barriers that keep them from access to rescued food."

Additionally, the network is able to transport surplus food from one pantry and deliver it to another in need before those food items expire.

"If one pantry gets more canned products through a drive than they can use before the expiration date, we load it onto the van and share it with other pantries in the network. I can put info out to my whole network and have people respond about whether they're interested in the products. The fact that we're sharing knowledge and food from one end of Montgomery County to another is truly remarkable," said Schafer.

The network operates with 34 pantries throughout the county and helps feed more than 15,000 households a year by providing resources to the food pantries.

The following is a list of pantry locations by region that work with MontCoAnti-Hunger Network throughout the county:

Lansdale/Indian Valley Area
• Manna on Main Street 606 E. Main Street, Lansdale
• Cornucopia Cupboard 499 E. Walnut Street, North Wales
• Keystone Opportunity Center 104 Main Street, Souderton
• Shepherd's Shelf 2211 Mainland Road, Harleysville
• Emmanuel ECC 100 S. Main Street, Hatfield
• Hatfield Church of the Brethren 1333 Cowpath Road, Hatfield
• Bethlehem Baptist Church 712 Penllyn Pike, Spring House
• Mattie Dixon Com. Cupboard 150 N. Main Street, Ambler

Norristown Area
• Catholic Social Services 353 E. Johnson Highway, Norristown
• Grace Lutheran 506 Haws Avenue, Norristown
• Patrician Society 121 E. Chestnut Street, Norristown
• New Hope Baptist 204 E. Oak Street, Norristown
• Salvation Army Norristown 533 Swede Street, Norristown
• Haws Avenue Food Pantry 800 W. Marshall Street, Norristown
• The Rachel Way Plymouth Meeting Mall, Plymouth Mtg.

Western County

- The Open Link 452 Penn Street, Pennsburg
- Pottstown Cluster 57 N. Franklin Street, Pottstown
- Salvation Army Pottstown 137 King Street, Pottstown
- Bethel Community Church 575 N. Keim Street, Pottstown
- The Open Door Ministry 350 Main Street, Royersford
- Daily Bread Com. Food Pantry 3938 Ridge Pike, Collegeville
- St. James Episcopal Church 3814 Germantown Pike, Collegeville

Eastern County

- Chelten Baptist, Seeds of Hope 1601 N. Limekiln Pike, Dresher
- Inter-Faith Food Cupboard 1250 Easton Road, Roslyn
- New Life Presbyterian 467 N. Easton Road, Glenside
- Mitzvah Food Program 8231 Old York Road, Elkins Park
- Jenkintown United Methodist 328 Summit Avenue, Jenkintown
- Willow Grove 7th Day Adventist 1576 Fairview Avenue, Willow Grove
- Calvary Church 7910 Washington Lane, Wyncote

Main Line

- Ardmore Food Panty 36 Ardmore Avenue, Ardmore
- ElderNet of Lower Merion 9 S. Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bryn Mawr
- Narberth Community Food Bank 201 Sabine Avenue, Narberth
- Mitzvah Food Program 345 Montgomery Avenue, Bala Cynwyd
- Memorial Church Of God in Christ 747 Buck Lane, Haverford