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## **Montgomery County Food Pantry Assistance Program established amid coronavirus pandemic**

By Rachel Ravina [rravina@thereporteronline.com](mailto:rravina@thereporteronline.com)  
[@rachelravina](#) on Twitter Nov 26, 2020

NORRISTOWN — Food banks financially impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will soon experience some relief.

Montgomery County and the MONTCO Anti-Hunger Network teamed up to launch the initiative aimed at allocating up to \$1 million from the CARES Act to local food pantries' needs and "increased demand during the COVID-19 pandemic," according to Montgomery County Chief Financial Officer Dean Dortone.

Dortone said in a presentation that county officials recognize the important role that food pantries have played throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as the agencies continue "feeding the most vulnerable populations" including "seniors, children, the homeless, and those in emergency need due to rapidly increasing job losses.

Dortone added that there are 43 food pantries in Montgomery County that work with MONTCO Anti-Hunger Network, and project organizers studied cities and states in counties across the country to get a sense of how to best establish a plan of action to assist food banks.

"The program will provide direct funding to improve food access and food security throughout Montgomery County" through monies for equipment, supplies, storage, and other facility improvements, according to Dortone.

For an organization like the Mattie Dixon Community Cupboard in Ambler, the subsidy would go a long way to supplement much-needed resources. Executive Director Cindy Wedholm said she applied for financial assistance and emphasized there how essential grants are to organizations like hers during this time of economic uncertainty. "For instance we need ... more storage and laptops so that if we had to work remotely, we would be able to access all of our information, and also, the PPE stuff is important for us," she told MediaNews Group.

Dortone said last month that county officials are still working out the details on distributing the funds. “We’re still developing how we’re gonna implement these categories, but we’re trying to take care of the majority of it through the Montgomery County Purchasing Department and parenting with MAHN and others to get some of this stuff in place very quickly,” Dortone said.

Montgomery County Commissioners’ Chairwoman Val Arkoosh noted the demand in use of services at local organizations has increased “anywhere from 30 to 50 percent depending upon the pantry” over the past several months. “This will be a much needed and welcomed injection of funding to help stabilize these pantries,” Arkoosh said last month.

Montgomery County Commissioners’ Vice Chairman Ken Lawrence Jr. agreed. “Our food pantries have literally ... been on the frontline of this pandemic since the beginning: dealing with extraordinary need, dealing with the loss of volunteers, dealing with a lack of supplies, but remained open,” he said. “So I’m happy to see that we can get some CARES assistance funding to them.”