

https://www.thereporteronline.com/news/montco-anti-hunger-network-assists-county-food-pantries-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/article_8a6cb66c-3bfe-11eb-88ac-bb969b8fc576.html

MontCo Anti-Hunger Network assists county food pantries amid coronavirus pandemic

By Rachel Ravina rravina@thereporteronline.com @rachelravina on Twitter
Dec 14, 2020



Volunteers at Upper Merion Area Community Cupboard in King of Prussia unload pallets of USDA Farmers to Families produce boxes provided by Seashore Fruit & Produce Company of Vineland, N.J.

Submitted via Paula Schafer

AMBLER — For Paula Schafer, executive director of the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network, facilitating resources for more than 40 area food pantries in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a monumental undertaking.

“It’s been exhausting, and it’s been exhilarating,” she said. “The pace has been relentless. The demands have been extraordinary, but the pockets of light, the high points, have been inspiring.”

Since COVID-19 first emerged locally in March, the ongoing public health crisis has strained finances for many, causing area families to seek the services of food pantries across the state's third-most populous county.

"We have been operating in crisis mode 24/7," Schafer said.

"I think these folks are operating in crisis mode too, and they are faced with some very harsh circumstances, and I imagine many of them are afraid," she later said.

With its office located in Ambler, the nonprofit organization has established relationships with Philabundance and the Share Food Program, key players in the fight against food insecurity.

Prior to the pandemic, Schafer said that acting as a liaison, the agency "had a role in providing resources and support to county food pantries and we were helping them feed more than 15,000 households per year."

The agency's retail rescue program secured more than 65 tons of foods for participating food pantries over the past two years, according to Schafer. In addition to resources, the nonprofit offers "best practice education for food pantry managers," and hosts an annual conference.

In this pandemic, food pantries have become an increasingly important community resource.

"Our food pantries have been on the front lines since the very beginning of COVID when nonessential businesses were shuttered, they became disproportionately responsible for filling the food gaps that people losing their jobs were faced with overnight," Schafer said. "This is something that happened in a flash, and not only were their numbers going up substantially, but they had to radically change their distribution models in order to keep things clean and people safely distanced."

Schafer said there were previously 38 agencies in the network, but that has expanded to roughly 50 organizations.

"Since COVID, we have become a primary coordinator of resources for the network, and ... we're taking advantage of opportunities as they come to us," she said. "So we need to be responsive and nimble, and able to capitalize on things that are outside of the box. They all require creative thinking, and a little bit of risk-taking."

The MontCo Anti-Hunger Network has received and allocated more than 40,000 pounds of donations from local vendors. They also participated in the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, an initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Schafer said. The Montgomery County

organization also joined forces with Lansdale Warehouse to “store and distribute 276,296 [pounds] of produce and dairy products to 27 county food pantries in July and August.”

Montgomery County officials authorized \$2 million to go directly to food pantries in need, according to Schafer, which amounted to \$1,373,048 in wholesale food purchases, \$475,868 in equipment and \$147,083 in renovations.

“We have never had an infusion of resources like this before,” Schafer said. “This is an incredible boom for the food pantry network, and we are very well-positioned to not only deal with COVID-19 hunger this winter, but we’re well-positioned for that long journey back to recovery.”

Schafer noted that the uptick in food pantry usage “definitely ranges across all demographics,” and often depends on the status of unemployment or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits that people are getting — or losing.

The majority of the food banks had a 60-percent increase, which translates to thousands of new clients.

For instance, Catholic Social Services in Norristown usually assists roughly 900 families per month, but that figure soared to 2,700 families, according to Schafer. Manna on Main Street in Lansdale experienced similar surges in demand and has served roughly three times its “normal numbers” throughout the COVID 19 pandemic.

“Thousands more people are coming to food pantries now who ... did not before,” she said. “Many, many, many of those people have never had to go to a food pantry before in their lives.”

Food pantries throughout the county area have had to adapt to changing health and safety regulations while meeting the demand of those in need. Schafer said that involves changing the previously established “choice model” that involved a market set-up to outdoor distribution with prepackaged boxes. “Contactless distribution became the norm across the network in order to keep people safe,” she said.

Schafer also noted that food pantries have experienced obstacles relating to “food supply” and volunteers. She said that many are often retired or seniors, and organizations lost a large portion of their volunteer workforce.

“The deck has been really heavily stacked against them, but food pantry folks are the most resourceful and the most resilient people I know,” Schafer said. “They have just been amazing.”

And continue they must. As the virus surges across Montgomery County, Pennsylvania and the nation, local food pantries are preparing for ways to serve clients during the harsh winter.

Schafer noted that cold temperatures and winter weather are obstacles as organizations workshop a number of ideas including providing outdoor heaters and covered spaces.

“That’s the biggest challenge right now is how we’re gonna pull this all off outside during winter,” she said.

Schafer said that stability is another concern.

“If we go into another peak right now, we are not entering this peak with the same level of strength that we had back in March because everybody’s already been impacted, and many resources have already been exhausted, and people are in a much more vulnerable place now than they were in March,” she said.

Schafer encourages those able to donate to do so.

“Food pantries are in need of continued community support, and the best way that they can do that is with financial donations. Food pantries, and our network connections through them, we have the greatest buying power through wholesale distributors,” she said. “The dollars we spend go much, much further than what a consumer can spend in the grocery store and then donate to a food pantry.”