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A digital effort to fight hunger in Montgomery County

by [Alfred Lubrano](#), Updated: January 29, 2019



ANTHONY PEZZOTTI / Staff Photographer

Ginny Kahr, 70, is burdened with troubles she couldn't foresee.

Never did she think she'd be living alone on \$1,200 a month in federally subsidized housing in Lansdale's [Schwenckfeld Manor](#). And she couldn't have imagined that a balky knee would hamper her so profoundly that she'd be unable to shop, forced to endure three weeks of eating nothing but peanut butter and bread.

Kahr said she grew up dutifully checking off all the boxes of society's expectations — she worked a factory job, was married before separating from her husband, and raised a daughter. She followed the rules, she said.

These days, however, Kahr is happy to report that at least one thing is becoming a little easier. A pilot food program by hunger-fighting organizations in Montgomery County is connecting low-income people to food pantries via computer, a low-income twist on the kind of online grocery ordering normally reserved for people in higher economic brackets.

And Kahr, who gets food-pantry items delivered, is eating healthy meals again. "This is very good," Kahr said, smiling. "It makes such a big difference."

Not everyone gets to the pantry

Like a bodega at lunchtime, the food pantry run by [Manna on Main Street](#), a hunger-fighting nonprofit in North Penn Commons in Lansdale, is bustling.

Manna's Market, as it's called, is the size of a small corner grocery. It stocks a modest donated supply of items such as Cheerios, Barilla pasta, Stove Top stuffing, as well as produce and some dairy products, for low-income people who can get food there two times a month.



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The food pantry located at Manna on Main Street in Lansdale. Clients are allowed to choose items based on a system of points assigned to foods.

The problem is, not everyone is able to access the pantry. The limited hours, the [stigma](#) of lining up for charitable food, the difficulty of finding adequate transportation, and some people's physical disabilities all can make visiting a challenge.

So the idea of ordering pantry food from a website took hold.

Throughout 2018, Manna on Main Street, along with antihunger agencies such as the Pottstown Cluster of Religious Communities, and the Open Link in Pennsburg, helped create online ordering for low-income residents. Also involved were organizations such as the [MontCo Anti-Hunger Network](#) (MAHN), Advanced Living Communities (Schwenckfeld's parent company), and the HealthSpark Foundation.

In all, around 130 Montgomery County households now take advantage of the service, according to Suzan Neiger Gould, executive director of Manna on Main Street.

The collaboration of the agencies will continue, said Paula Schafer, administrator of MAHN. "We are trying to make all this fly on a bigger scale," she said, explaining that the organizations are hoping to expand online ordering throughout pantries in Montgomery County.

Advocates believe the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia initiated online food-pantry ordering in the region in 2015. The federation has five pantries known as the [Mitzvah Food Program](#).

“I think we technically were the first,” said federation spokesperson Laura Frank. “But there’s no way of knowing.” Neither is it clear how many places across the nation offer online ordering from pantries.

Spaghetti squash and embarrassment

At Manna’s Market the other day, Britt Peterson grabbed some plastic bags and filled an order that came in via computer from a client from Schwenckfeld Manor: boxed milk, spaghetti squash, a can of tomatoes. Peterson added the groceries to a basket of other orders that were to be driven to Schwenckfeld.

Many seniors who’ve never touched a computer keyboard or smartphone somehow figure a way to send an order, Gould said. For Ethel Henry of Lansdale, however, nothing about using a phone to order went smoothly.



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Ethel Henry, 73, receives her groceries from Britt Peterson at Manna on Main Street.

“It was hard to learn how to order [electronically],” said Henry, a 73-year-old widow on a fixed income who worked as a tax accountant for the IRS. “It was much easier to shop for food” in her younger days, she said.

A friend, Swantje Edwards, a German immigrant and senior citizen who declined to give her age, said she didn’t have trouble learning how to order food on her computer. Edwards, a widow who, after her seven children were grown, worked for an organization that helped homeless children in Africa, said she prefers the computer because showing her face in a pantry is difficult.

“Online ordering offers anonymity,” she said. “It was embarrassing to go to the [pantry](#).”

Gathering for food

Within an hour of Britt Peterson’s collecting food at the Manna pantry, the bags were picked up and delivered to Schwenckfeld Manor by Kathleen Salantri, director of support services for Advanced Living Communities. The residents who had placed the orders gathered in the Schwenckfeld lobby to claim their items.



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Kathleen Salantri delivers groceries to Schwenckfeld Manor, Lansdale.

“If you told me 20 years ago I’d be getting food from a pantry like this,” said Linda Cohen, 65 and divorced, “I wouldn’t have believed it.”

Describing herself as “computer illiterate,” Cohen, who worked as a hairdresser for 35 years in Jenkintown and Souderton, said Kahr helped her choose pantry items. In her job at a factory that manufactured bank checks, Kahr had learned computer skills.

Quite a few of the residents live alone, are homebound, and have an average household income of \$15,000, said Kim Krauter, vice president of operations for Advanced Living Communities.

“Most of the people here have worked hard in their lives, and all of them have a story,” Krauter said. “Their spouses died young, or they got divorced and lost money, or someone stole their pensions.”

Hunger is an added indignity, Salantri said. But online ordering is expanding, and residents will be happy to stock their empty refrigerators.