



The meals must go on

Local food pantries, soup kitchens form coalition to ensure food distribution continues through COVID-19 pandemic

By Sarah Wolpoff

Thursday, March 19, 2020 6:02 AM\

Carver Market patrons line up outside the rear entrance of the 400 Westchester Ave. community center, waiting for Welcome Center Team member José Angles to give them groceries outside. Courtesy of Leanne Tormey

Panic around gathering food and supplies is just as severe as the coronavirus pandemic that's rousing people across the country to rush to stores—hoarding toilet paper, hand sanitizer, water and meat among other necessities in the process.

It's no secret that food insecurity is a reality in the community. That's why numerous organizations, such as Caritas of Port Chester, the Carver Center, the Salvation Army and the Don Bosco Community Center, have spent decades establishing solid food distribution methods to ensure residents have access to meals throughout the week.

But no organization, no matter how philanthropic, is immune to the potential damages the COVID-19 outbreak could claim. Therefore, in this time of uncertainty, they made moves to come together as one to feed the community.

In efforts to plan ahead, and for the worst, representatives from the local food pantries, soup kitchens and the Village of Port Chester had their first meeting at the Carver Center on Friday, Mar. 13, with the intent of forming a food distribution coalition. The idea, according to Carver Center Chief Learning Officer Leanne Tormey, was to fill in the gaps and coordinate their services to support each other—as any of their operations can change any day as the coronavirus continues to spread.

"There are many organizations in Port Chester that fill this incredibly important need of feeding the community," Tormey said. "This was the first time we all decided, we're all doing the same good work. Let's get together to be as prepared and ready as we can in case something happens."

Current distribution plans

Vulnerable populations, such as children and seniors, in both Port Chester and Rye Brook still have access to meals through regular entities they may have relied on before the coronavirus outbreak—despite the senior centers and school districts being closed to the public.

The Port Chester Senior Center is making meal deliveries upon request and continues to package meals to go for outdoor pick-up. The Rye Brook Senior Center is also available for food and grocery deliveries to residents' homes.

Though school districts across the state have closed, free meals are available to all students at every Port Chester elementary school campus between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. every day school would normally be in session. The packages, a brunch of sorts, include a muffin, sandwich, various fruits and veggies and two cartons of milk.

Still, there are hundreds of families in Port Chester who rely on the philanthropy of local soup kitchens and food pantries to make it through the week. Bill Cusano, the executive director at Caritas of Port Chester who led the call for collaboration, said they've agreed to share resources—both supplies and staff—in case disaster strikes.

"If someone in our organizations tests positive for this virus, we all have to quarantine and shut down for two weeks, so who's going to pick up the slack?" Cusano said. "That's why we have to work together, because we can't do that alone. It's a scary thing to think of the day where you may have to close up and people go unfed."

Through collaboration, Cusano noted they can also limit the number of volunteers needed—an important measure at this point as the more people involved, the higher the risk of the virus spreading.

Margaret Quatela, captain of the Port Chester/Rye Brook Salvation Army, stressed that people can still help by donating food. Now more than ever, there is a need for more supplies.

The groups are trying to organize their schedules to make sure residents in need are fed as effectively and efficiently as possible.

As of now, though it may change, most of their schedules are the same as usual with a few modifications to limit large gatherings. The Carver Market at 400 Westchester Ave. is open Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., while the Caritas pantry, operating in the St. Peter's Church parking lot, opens at 9 a.m. on Wednesdays and 8 a.m. on Saturdays. The Salvation Army's pantry is open Monday-Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 36 Bush Ave.

All the food pantries now service patrons outside—bringing out bags of groceries to the building entries and parking lots to prevent them from crowding in enclosed spaces.

Serving food to go, the Caritas Soup Kitchen is also continuing service as usual at 9 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Monday-Friday.

"Right now, we're just trying to keep it safe for people," Cusano said. "Trying to keep the cafeteria clean every time someone goes in there is very difficult. So instead of putting the resources on cleaning, we're putting the resources on giving away more food."

Both Quatela and Cusano noted that if anyone needs a home delivery, they will find a way to bring residents food. Quatela can be reached at 914-939-2725 and Cusano at 914-305-3967.

Support in action

The coalition has already proven to be beneficial, Cusano said during a special food distribution day on Monday, Mar. 16, where 65 families dropped by to pick up groceries donated by the Empire City Casino, which closed down over the weekend due to coronavirus-containment mandates.

That Monday, the Carver Center sent over a cook when Cusano reached out to the group being down one.

"This is just so important to me, helping people like this," Cusano said. "Just to keep them from getting panicked. In the stores people are going crazy. At least here it's calm and because of all this, everyone will get food. They're not fighting with each other and they're so appreciative of everything we can do. It's just so rewarding."

After a hectic day on Wednesday, Mar. 18, Quatela agreed with Cusano's sentiment. After it became clear the Salvation Army was nearing its end of resources for the day, she said Caritas was able to drop off more supplies.

The future of collaboration

Moving forward, Cusano said the organizations will continue having regular video conferences to ensure the community still gets fed. Ideally, he would like to get meals prepared and frozen in bulk now, in case issues arise in the coming weeks.

Seeing the groups come together was inspiring to Tormey, who sees a long-term future with this coalition model.

"I think this is the beginning of a new way of food providers, and I hope it lasts beyond the coronavirus," Tormey said. "I didn't know exactly what services the different organizations provided, or at least didn't have a sense of how comprehensive it was. We all knew about each other but didn't know the extent."

In fact, Quatela said this is an initiative a few of them have been trying to put together for years. It always made sense to coordinate for all the same reasons it does now—for efficiency and to ensure all gaps are being filled.

"We've been trying to form a coalition for years, but this crisis has really forced people to expedite that," she said. "We're doing our best. I hope what comes out of this experience is that we'll have a regular, solid coalition. Because it has raised a lot of areas where we can continue doing better. How we distribute food, work together and communicate. All of those are essential if we have the common goal of feeding people in Port Chester."