

Demand for help at NJ food banks will grow even if COVID-19 retreats

JON HURDLE, CONTRIBUTING WRITER | JANUARY 19, 2021 | [CORONAVIRUS IN NJ, MORE ISSUES](#)

After record distributions in 2020, providers say economic damage will outlast pandemic



Credit: New York National Guard via Flickr

Even when the pandemic subsides, hunger in New Jersey and nearby states will continue to grow.

New Jersey's providers of emergency food assistance gave out record amounts of food in 2020 as unemployment surged amid the pandemic, and they expect strong demand to continue this year even if the COVID-19 virus recedes as vaccines become more widely available.

The economic damage wrought by the pandemic is expected to persist long after infections drop because not everyone who lost their job will get rehired, and some businesses, especially in the restaurant and hospitality sector, will remain shut indefinitely.

That means the need for food assistance is likely to stay at its current high level or move even higher, executives from food-assistance groups say.

Hunger will outlast pandemic

“Even though the vaccine will ultimately be distributed and the pandemic itself will begin to subside, the economic effects of it are not going to subside,” said Ilene Isaacs, executive director of Table to Table, a nonprofit that distributes perishable goods to food pantries in Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Passaic counties. “Every projection is that the effects are going to be felt for a long time, and we’re gearing up for that.”

In 2020, Table to Table delivered enough food for 38 million meals — the highest number, it said, in its 21-year history. That was up from 26 million meals in 2019, and about a third higher than the goal for 2020 before the pandemic started. This year, the group is officially planning to provide enough food for 39 million meals, but Isaacs expects the total will be even higher.

Before the pandemic, there was a constant waiting list of about 60 agencies wanting food deliveries, and they will still be there even if everyone who got laid off during the pandemic miraculously gets their jobs back, she said.

“Even if it was a perfect world and everybody who lost their jobs got called back to work — which realistically we know is not going to happen — we would then go back to a situation where our waiting list continues to grow,” she said.

Jobless and hungry

New Jersey’s official jobless rate jumped to 10.2% in November, the latest month for which state data is available, according to the Department of Labor. That was 2.2 percentage points higher than in October, and about three times the pre-pandemic rate. By the end of November, the state had regained only 58% of the jobs lost since April, the department said. The jobless rate is watched by food-assistance groups as the best indicator of demand for food.

At Catholic Charities, which operates three food pantries, in Dover, Franklin and Paterson, demand rose by more than four times last year compared with pre-

pandemic levels, said Chris Brancato, a spokesman for the group.

“There are more people out of work, and thus having a challenging time putting food on the table for their families,” Brancato said. “We have seen many people come to our doors for the first time, including small-business owners, people in hospitality, those in the restaurant business and from many other fields.”

He said demand surged from 5,000-7,000 people a month before the pandemic to a “staggering” high of 26,500 in November.

Delivering meals to more than 1 million kids

In Camden, Burlington, Gloucester and Salem counties, the Food Bank of South Jersey distributed 22.5 million pounds of food last year, up from 15 million pounds in 2019, said Marie Alonso, a spokeswoman. She said the number of people who are “food insecure” — those who don’t have consistent access to healthy food — surged as high as 60% of the region’s population last year. The food bank distributed more than 1 million children’s meals in 2020, more than double the number in 2019.

“COVID-19 introduced a dramatically altered South Jersey food-insecurity landscape, with thousands of additional households falling into poverty due to joblessness and economic hardship,” said Fred Wasiak, president of the Food Bank of South Jersey. He said more than 40% of the people who showed up for the bank’s food distributions in 2020 had never previously sought food assistance.

And in Monmouth and Ocean counties, whose economies have been especially hard-hit by the pandemic because of their dependence on the hospitality industry, demand has surged for food from Fulfill, a food bank that serves the two counties.

Demand for food jumped about 40% during the year, and the challenge was compounded by a surge in food costs of more than 400% because of supply constraints created by the pandemic, said Kim Guadagno, the group’s

president. Her food bank is now serving about 215,000 people, up from 136,000 before the pandemic.

The cost of a truckload of food rose from \$20,000 in February to about \$65,000 in May, forcing Fulfill to rely heavily on the federal government plus an increase in individual donations in order to feed the increased number of people seeking food, she said.

The jobless rate in Monmouth County surged to 8.6% in November from 3.3% pre-pandemic, and in Ocean County it more than doubled to 9.2% from 4.0%. Both levels are expected to stay that way for at least the winter, sustaining the strong demand for food assistance, said Guadagno, the state's former lieutenant governor.

"People don't believe that Monmouth and Ocean counties have hungry people," she said. "Now, not only do we have hungry people, we have hungry children, and that's the part that should strike everybody."

Shuttered schools can't deliver free meals

The increase in childhood hunger has been worsened by the pandemic-driven closure of schools, which fed eligible students breakfast and lunch, Guadagno said. In response, Fulfill has given students backpacks of food to last them over a weekend; demand for those was 77% higher in December than it was a year earlier.

She predicted more restaurants will close over the winter, local unemployment will jump and that will result in an increased demand for food assistance. "I think the darkest days are still ahead of us," she said.

At a weekly food pantry in Englewood supplied by Table to Table, director Dionisio Cucuta recalled a client who tearfully explained to him why she was driving her new Mercedes to pick up food that she could not afford to buy.

Cucuta said he greets everyone who comes to collect food, and he noticed that the woman had her head down while waiting in line in her car.

Mercedes Benz doesn't deter hunger

"She said, 'I'm feeling kind of horrible and embarrassed because everybody's looking at me in this beautiful car, and I'm thinking that people want to know what I'm doing here lining up for food. The only reason I'm here is that my husband lost his business and went belly up, and lost everything, and we have three children in the house that we don't have food for,'" Cucuta said.

He said he explained to her that he asks no questions because he figures that anyone who spends hours waiting in line for the food pantry — called Table to Table Tuesdays — to open is genuinely in need.

"Anyone who is going to sit there and wait for food really needs it," he said.

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