

'How can we help?'

Steep rise in need at food pantries met by 'overwhelming' generosity

By Lisa Reisman

On the morning of April 20, Branford's Courtney Rosenberg issued a 48-hour challenge to both her Facebook friends and a local Facebook group colorfully named for the female dog: To make Venmo donations of as little as \$5 that she would use to order trays of prepared food from local restaurants for delivery to Branford's Community Dining Room.

Forty-eight hours later, Rosenberg, formerly the CDR volunteer coordinator, had raised over \$2,500.

The "give back project," as she termed it, signaled a trend that's become apparent at two of the Shoreline's food pantries and soup kitchens since the outbreak. The numbers of people seeking meals from the Community Dining Room in Branford and groceries from the Shoreline Soup Kitchens & Pantries are on the rise, but so are the numbers of those stepping up to help.

"The CDR is serving 1,200 meals per week between seven of their programs with only minimal volunteers to prepare and serve those meals," Rosenberg said. "Any little bit we can do to have food already prepared, even if it's only the main course of the meal, will alleviate some of the stress."

"It's just a tremendous help," said Executive Director Judy Barron, who added that CDR has continued to see a steep increase in the amount of lunchtime meals as well as Wednesday and Friday takeout dinners being served.

Rosenberg will use the money she raised to order trays of food from restaurants that have been donating to the CDR from the beginning.

Those include La Cucina, Horner's Nest, Sweets on Main, Donovan's Reef, Love Bakery & Cafe, Indian Neck Pizza, Crostini, Parthenon Diner, USS Chowder Pot III, Jalapeno Heaven and Rosso Vino, all of Branford, with Stop & Shop donating a sizeable gift card to the CDR.

"Cindy Wallace of Cilantro (Guilford) has also been bringing food twice a week from her customers' donations, as well as her own funds," Rosenberg said. "She's been in constant contact with the CDR kitchen coordinator about what CDR needs."

"But all these restaurants were so great when I ordered," she said. "They either reduced the cost or are throwing in additional food on their end."

Rosenberg hasn't been alone in stepping up to support those in need.

At press time, CDR was using a generous donation from a volunteer to bring in D&S Hot Dogs in Guilford on Tuesday, April 28.

"They're going to set up in the side area where we usually distribute meals and people are going to be able to come and get a hotdog, a drink, and chips," Barron said, adding that the cutlery they'll be using will come from the donation of 5,000 pieces from The Safety Zone in

Guilford.

"Just something to brighten their day and instill a little bit of normalcy at this time."

The event is also an occasion to socialize, albeit from a social distance, which CDR maintains with tape marked on the parking lot.

"It's frustrating for some of our participants who like to come for fellowship and can't really chat in the parking lot right now, but everyone's sticking with it," she said.

The trays of food coming from Rosenberg's challenge, as well as from Forte's Market (Guilford) and Rosso Vino, among other restaurants, will help in the next few weeks, but the CDR is still facing shortages on bread, produce, and desserts.

With the rise in numbers from those laid off or on furlough, "it goes as quickly as you get it," Barron said. "Carbonella & Desarbo (produce wholesaler) has been really great in donating but we can't get it fast enough to put back out there, and it's so important to be able to provide produce for them."

Further up the Shoreline, Amy Hollis, executive director of Shoreline Soup Kitchen & Pantries, which offers food and fellowship to people in need in 11 towns, from Madison to East Lyme to Chester, sounded a similar refrain.

While SSK&P has seen a stunning 40 percent increase of families visiting the pantries within the last month, Hollis said, "I continue to be overwhelmed by the community spirit, and the calls, not just asking whether they can come in for groceries, but how they can help and what do we need."

The nine meal sites remain closed, but all five of SSK&P's food pantries — in Old Lyme, Old Saybrook, Westbrook, Clinton and Old Lyme — continue to operate with curbside delivery.

For locations and hours of operation, visit shoreslinesoupkitchens.org/get-help.

Hollis said that the amount of food — 27,000 pounds last week — that SSKP has been providing to its guests has remained largely consistent. The difference is the variety.

As with anyone who goes grocery shopping these days, "we don't always know what we're going to get," she said, adding that she'd just heard that there was milk available in New London County. "The bags always contain shelf-stable foods, fresh produce, meat, eggs, and dairy, but what kind of each changes week to week."

The pantries have generally avoided the gridlock of cars seen in other cities and towns.

"We've had some lines of cars but we tend to spread out our pantry service over a matter of hours each day, so it's busy but the line is moving."

Still, the lines are getting longer.

"It's impacting everyone," Hollis said. "Everyone knows someone who's lost a job and has been furloughed. People who never had to go to a pantry



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Jaye Andrews, Branford Food Pantry vice president, right, and Wendy Cowles, Branford Food Pantry, left, prepare food baskets at the pantry in Branford for homebound clients in Branford that need of food during the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic.



Amy Hollis / Contributed photo

Volunteers at SSK&P's Westbrook pantry waiting out a downpour on Tuesday, April 21.



Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media

Branford Food Pantry volunteer Bob Barnes of Hamden loads food baskets for delivery from the pantry in Branford to homebound clients in Branford in need of food during the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic

before are coming for the first time."

Far from a stigma that might have attached to the need to resort to a food pantry for gro-

ceries, or tension that might arise from waiting in long lines, there's been an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

"I think everyone recognizes

that we're all in the same boat," she said. "Whether we have to visit a food pantry or not, we all may be feeling a sense of food insecurity when we can't find what we think we need."

Food donations are welcome, but only if, Hollis stressed, "you're already out and about." Visit shoreslinesoupkitchens.org and click on the link for donate food for a list of where food donations can be dropped off.

More essential than food or money donations, Hollis added, is "simply checking in on your neighbors and your friends and asking how they're doing and how you can help."

During a torrential downpour earlier that week, the pantries stayed open.

"We had a couple of pop up tents so we managed," she said. "We're not going anywhere."

For SSK&P information, visit shoreslinesoupkitchens.org, call 860-388-1988, or, for the latest, check them out on Facebook at The Shoreline Soup Kitchens & Pantries, Inc.

For CDR information, visit communitydiningroom.org, call 203-488-9750, or, for the latest, check them out on Facebook at Community Dining Room in