

# Volunteer shortages, surging demand: Mass. food banks say this is unlike any other point in history

By [Janelle Nanos](#) and [Victoria McGrane](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 12, 2020, 5:25 p.m.



Volunteers packed up bags of bagels to be distributed to Waltham residents. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

The first Thursday of every month typically brings about 250 to 300 families to the Watch City Market, a Waltham food pantry that distributes fresh fruit and veggies and other healthy staples to those in need.

On April 2, the first time the pantry opened after the COVID-19 crisis struck, a line of cars began queuing up an hour and a half before distribution began. More than 900

people showed up at the church parking lot where the group had moved its operations to accommodate social distancing, but the pantry only had food for the first 330 in line.

“We ran out of food in 45 minutes,” said Myriam Michel, the executive director of Healthy Waltham, a nonprofit that runs the pantry, with a sigh. “The need has increased tremendously.”

Grinding the economy to a halt, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown hundreds of thousands of people out of work in Massachusetts, and millions more throughout the country. The staggering pace of layoffs and furloughs has led to a surge in demand for the services of food banks, pantries, and food rescue organizations, who are rushing to serve those newly in need while also navigating the challenges of distributing food safely amid a deadly pandemic.

The demand has escalated so high, so fast, that many in the industry say it’s unlike any other point in history.

“This is a situation that is unprecedented. We don’t have a playbook. We’re making it up every day,” said Catherine Drennan, spokeswoman for the Greater Boston Food Bank, which serves 57 million meals a year across 190 cities and towns in Eastern Massachusetts.



People lined up for food donations organized by Healthy Waltham. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

New England's largest hunger relief organization, the food bank has seen a 50 percent increase in demand over this time last year, said Drennan. March was the largest distribution month in the organization's 40-year history, with more than 8 million pounds distributed to its network of nearly 600 partner agencies throughout the region.

For reference, the most the organization has ever distributed in years past was 5 million pounds of food a month, which came at peak holiday seasons or during other crises, she said. That spike is happening even as more than 60 of its donation distribution sites have been closed because of the virus.

And the need is growing throughout the Commonwealth.

"We've been seeing a rapid increase in demand," said Christina Maxwell, director of programs for the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. She said the group, which serves a network of 175 antihunger programs in the state's four westernmost counties,

distributed 29 percent more food — or the equivalent of more than 187,000 meals — in March over the same period a year earlier.

“And that wasn’t even a whole month of the pandemic,” she noted.



Waltham city councilor-at-large Pat O'Brian (left) and Waltham city councilor John McLaughlin pushcarts full of vegetables and fruits to be given away to Waltham residents. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Some pantries they work with have seen demand surge by as much as 800 percent, she said.

One of the food bank’s partners, Oasis Food Pantry in Springfield, had its weekly Friday evening distribution shut down by police several weeks ago because so many people showed up that their cars blocked traffic.

“There was just this influx of people,” said John Foley, who runs the Oasis pantry.

The group relocated distribution to a high school parking lot, and the next week roughly 2,000 cars lined up, he said. Foley estimated that overall demand for food from the

pantry is at least triple what it typically is.

“I’m giving away in one week what I used to give away in a month,” he said.

With more people needing food, the coronavirus has also complicated operations for these groups. Pantries that used to allow people to choose items are now pre-packing bags of food to reduce human contact, and most have moved to distributing food outside their buildings. Others have switched to a drive-through model where volunteers place food directly in people’s trunks. Groups that prepare meals are packing them up to go, rather than letting anyone eat on site.



Waltham School committee member Jane Gatley waited to hand out bags of fruits and vegetables to Waltham residents. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Healthy Waltham has adopted a hybrid. On Saturday, volunteers deposited bags of food directly into cars that pulled up on one side of St. Mary’s Parish parking lot, while a line of people on foot stretched four blocks long on the other side. Various local public

officials, including Waltham's mayor, packed and handed out paper bags full of bagels, bananas, potatoes, and other foods to about 500 people.

Many hunger relief organizations tend to rely on volunteers to help sort food and distribute products, and those are hard to come by as corporate and school groups are no longer taking part. The Greater Boston Food Bank typically has more than 500 volunteers a week, Drennan said, but that has been winnowed down to just 90. So now, warehouse staffers have been working longer hours, starting their days at 4 a.m., she said.

"The pace at which we're going right now, I'm not sure it's sustainable," she said. "We're raising record numbers of money, which is great, but we probably need double what we've raised to get through the next six months or so."

Meanwhile, the virus is straining the pantries' ability to get the food.

Maxwell, from the Food Bank of Western Mass., said that although food deliveries from the state and federal government are still arriving on time, donations from area grocery stores "have bottomed out" as those stores have seen record sales, with people stocking up to sustain themselves and limiting shopping trips. "There's nothing left for them to give."

In response, the food bank is having to purchase more food than usual. And although they've also seen an uptick in monetary donations, "it's not enough for us to keep up with the food demand that we're going to have," said Maxwell, predicting that job losses would continue to mount and economic hardship linger well after social distancing ends.

The economic rescue package passed by Congress in late March includes some money for hunger relief organizations, but Maxwell said she doesn't think her food bank will see that money until the summer.

Drennan said the four food banks across Massachusetts are fortunate in that they get more than \$20 million in annual funding from the state.

“We’re uniquely positioned because we have a food acquisition purchasing team, and lots of other food banks across the country aren’t accustomed to purchasing,” she said. “Most are more reliant on USDA products or local donations.”

GBFB’s acquisition team usually buys about \$75,000 worth of food a month; they’re now planning to spend \$750,000 a month through June at a minimum, she said. The organization has \$1.7 million worth of food purchases set to arrive between now and June, and they’ve set aside at least \$2.2 million for additional food purchases, Drennan said.

“But the cost of food is increasing, as are ancillary costs like freight,” she added.

Three weeks ago, they could buy a dozen eggs for 79 cents. “Today they are \$3 a dozen. It is a supply-and-demand reality, at least for the next two to four months while manufacturers increase production to feed that demand.”

Ashley Stanley, the executive director of Lovin’ Spoonfuls, a food rescue organization that serves Central and Eastern Massachusetts, said her group hasn’t seen the amount of food donated by grocery stores drop off much: She is now seeing about 75,000 to 77,000 pounds donated weekly, whereas she typically distributes about 80,000 pounds of food donated from supermarkets each week.

The shift, she said, is in who has been asking for it.

Several of her partner organizations have shuttered for the time being while others are scrambling to ramp up services to handle a surge in demand. And since the shutdown started, the organization has only one driver in each van making deliveries, which makes meeting the emergency needs of groups as the crisis unfolds that much more challenging.

Earlier this month, as the city of Boston rehoused a number of homeless people who might have been exposed to the virus in a new facility, the organization was able to route a truck to get them prepared sandwiches and fruit.

“Our team basically has shifted from what was set schedule and predictable routes to what is now completely unpredictable,” said the organization’s chief operating officer, Lauren Palumbo. “We have to call everyone the day before and ask, are you open tomorrow, can we come tomorrow? Nothing is really certain anymore.”

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