

NEW REALITY

FOOD PROVIDERS ADJUST



JULIA MALAKIE / LOWELL SUN

Jay Looney of Dracut loads food for the St. Mary Magdalen of Tyngsboro food pantry. It was their regular Wednesday pickup.

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LOWELL » When food pantries and other organizations that provide food for people in need came to the Merrimack Valley Food Bank this week, they received their loads of shelf-stable, frozen and refrigerated goods in a different way than normal.

"We're being a little more automated than usual. But we'll always be an approachable family atmosphere food bank," said Executive Director Amy Pessia. "That's what we pride ourselves for and we want to remain that way."

Instead of having representatives of member agencies en-

ter the building to select items, MVFB is taking food orders by email ahead of time, she said. The packaged food orders are brought out onto the loading dock at their regularly scheduled shopping appointments, and they load it into their vehicles, Pessia said.

The food bank's food distribution center in Lowell supplies more than 140 food programs across more than 30 communities in the region. In a time unsettled by fears of the coronavirus pandemic, MVFB is taking steps to ensure social distancing and protect its employees, volunteers, member agencies and others that may be at risk of getting the illness,

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Organizations continue to pick up food for local food pantries from the Merrimack Valley Food Bank. Warehouse assistant Brandon Crocker of Pepperell puts on fresh gloves after cleaning his hands.

Food banks

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Pessia said.

MVFB is also limiting the number of volunteers entering the building to three at a time, and providing them with gloves and hand sanitizer, she said.

The food bank's mobile pantry program relies on volunteers to deliver groceries to the home-bound elderly and people with disabilities at more than 250 households throughout Greater Lowell, Pessia said. Several volunteers have backed away due to the pandemic, leaving the program director to do those deliveries on her own, she said.

MVFB currently provides food to nearly 50,000 people per month, but Pessia anticipates the demand will spike in the next two to eight weeks to as many as 70,000 people.

Children are out of school and families need to provide the meals they would normally have in school, parents may be out of work or facing increased child care costs, Pessia said. Workers who lose hours will be struggling with their regular financial obligations, and those who qualify for emergency unemployment benefits will only be living on a percentage of what they would normally earn, she said.

There are also people that are already living paycheck to paycheck that sometimes "need that little hand up" from the food bank, who are going to need that more often, Pessia said.

She said MVFB is still distributing food donated in November and December, and others have recently made donations of cases of water, canned food and heat-and-eat meals, and others have come with bags of soup, paper products and other items people are finding in short supply, Pessia said. She said there have also been monetary donations that will help replenish the food bank.

But she anticipates the current supply will be depleted more quickly than usual, especially going into the spring and summer months when donations normally drop.

"We need the support of our generous community partners, now more than ever, so that we can help people get nutritious food so they can work or look for



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Santiago Ferreira, left, and Wilma Santiago of Lawrence, director of Water Sources food pantry in Lawrence, finish their weekly pickup of food.

work, so they can learn and maintain health," Pessia said.

Salvation Army of Greater Lowell Capt. Timothy Ross said the coronavirus pandemic has necessitated the closure of some of its juvenile and senior programs, and changes to its food pantry and meal services normally served on premises.

Those who use the food pantry are normally able to come in and make their own selections on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but now pantry items are being pre-bagged and handed out at the door, he said. Recipients with specific dietary needs can call ahead to ensure they get items they need, and for those who can't, staff will do the best they can to accommodate them at the door, Ross said.

Senior meals normally held Tuesday and Thursday mornings and community meals on Saturday and Sunday afternoons cannot be held as usual due to gathering size restrictions. However, the meals will still be provided at the scheduled times, but as pre-packaged to-go meals handed out at the door, Ross said.

"We can continue to serve people and meet people's needs, we just have to change it a bit so we can follow the precautions and health mandates," Ross said.

Pantry and meal volumes are currently normal for the time of



From left, warehouse manager Tony Luna, of Lowell, warehouse assistant Brandon Crocker, of Pepperell, and executive director Amy Pessia, of Lowell, chat at the warehouse.

year, but he said he anticipates increased need in the coming weeks as area residents' circumstances may change due to the pandemic. Ross said he plans to have extra meals packaged for upcoming community meals.

He said the Salvation Army will also be working closely with the Merrimack Valley Food Bank, other partners and agencies to make sure its food pantry is well-stocked and ready to serve those in need in this crisis.

Since Gov. Charlie Baker declared the state of emergency,

Loaves and Fishes Pantry in Devens has been operating as a drive-through to continue serving the residents of Ayer, Devens, Dunstable, Groton, Harvard, Littleton and Shirley, said Executive Director Patty Stern.

No clients are entering the building, she said. A limited number of staff and volunteers gather items and deliver the packaged groceries to the clients waiting in their cars, Stern said. Masks and gloves are available to those working, and there is enhanced daily cleaning and disin-

fecting in the pantry, she said.

Stern said she's already seen a slight uptick in the number of people coming through the pantry, including new families in the region and people from outside of its service area. She said those from outside of the pantry's member towns aren't being turned away, but they receive a smaller amount of food one time only and are provided with information to find resources in their own communities, she said.

Loaves and Fishes has been spending about \$7,000 to \$8,000 per month on food, but Stern said it could go as high as \$15,000 to \$20,000 to meet the increased need and maintain the regular level of service.

To complicate matters, the food pantry is experiencing some supply chain issues due to difficulty in transporting orders from the Greater Boston Food Bank, Stern said.

Two local companies, Wilson Brothers HVAC in Pepperell and Bursaw Gas & Oil in Acton, have stepped up to provide vehicles and drivers to assist the pantry over the next couple weeks, she said.

"After that, all bets are off," Stern said.

She's also expecting decreased revenue due to the cancellation of the pantry's annual golf tournament fundraiser in June. The Nashoba Great Food Walk, which also benefits the pantry, has also been physically canceled but organizers intend to hold a virtual version on April 10, Stern said.

She asked that the community consider making financial donations to support the pantry instead of bringing food items in order to limit exposure to the coronavirus. Monetary donations allow the pantry to purchase in bulk the items it needs, Stern said.

She said she hopes to be able to continue providing the same amount of food to families that come to the pantry. The only circumstances under which the pantry would close are increased community spread of COVID-19 in the area, insufficient number of volunteers and the supply chain drying up, Stern said.

For more information on how to support these organizations or seek assistance, visit mvfb.org, salvationarmyma.org/lowell and loavesfishespantry.org.