



Seniors Trapped by Covid-19 Benefit from Food Bank Deliveries

By DANIEL DEVINE

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SPARTA, NJ - Seniors living in subsidized housing are at a heightened risk of coronavirus infection and fatality due to their age, living in close quarters, low income and poor health.

Lockdowns, implemented by many nursing homes across the country, are not an option for these low-income seniors because they are viewed as independent and expected to secure their own food. Locally, this means more folks are relying on the Sparta Ecumenical Food pantry. Like other food pantries throughout the county, the Sparta Food Pantry has had to learn to multitask, to be more and do more for more people.

An estimated 2.5 million seniors in the country face this dilemma; stay home and hungry or go shopping and increase your exposure to the virus. Food banks nationwide have targeted this issue by expanding their services to include delivery.

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Since the onset of the pandemic, Dennis Van Dunk, 74, and his wife of over 50 years, Sharon Van Dunk, 73, have received weekly food deliveries from one of those food banks: the Sparta Ecumenical Food Pantry.



The Sparta Ecumenical Food Pantry, located within the First Presbyterian Church of Sparta complex. Sparta, New Jersey.

The Van Dunks live in Concetta Towers, in Franklin, New Jersey. The subsidized, four-story facility is one of six in Sussex County served by the Sparta pantry; its 42 residents are among the 400 seniors who receive food bags from the pantry on a weekly basis.



Concetta Towers, Franklin, New Jersey. The senior living facility, subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, opened in 1988.

"I love the almond milk," Dennis Van Dunk said about one of the delivered items. "I like the clam chowder too, I'm eating it now," he continued during the phone interview. "I'm grateful."

Joe Ambrosio, 86, who has owned and operated Concetta Towers for 32 years, is both thankful and keenly aware that the delivery service reduces the seniors' exposure to the coronavirus.

"Valerie's volunteers come in their own cars, and deliver food every Friday, they are great people" Ambrosio said of the pantry and its director, Valerie Macchio.

Pre-pandemic, the Van Dunks averaged 12 trips a month to secure food items.

They have made zero such trips since March, although Dennis Van Dunk does still visit the doctor once per month for a chronic health condition.

"We have not had one death from Covid," Ambrosio said with emotion. "It is about limiting people coming and going," he said, returning to a business-like tone.

Since March 2020, the Sparta pantry has delivered over 16,000 food bags to low-income seniors in Sussex County.

The bags contain milk, soup, cereal, juice, vegetables, pasta, rice and noodles. With associated condiments.

**Food**

packed at the Sparta Ecumenical Food Pantry, ready for delivery to homebound seniors

Dark hair pulled back, blue jeans tucked into tan work boots, a blue and white plaid jacket wrapped around her shoulders, Macchio was ready to work on a brisk January morning.



Valerie

Machio, Director, Sparta Ecumenical Food Pantry; volunteer, Richard Parimak.

"You tell me you need it, we will get it to you," Macchio said about getting food to local seniors, her voice filled with determination.

Sitting at a folding table in the pantry's kitchen, Macchio was multitasking, managing over a dozen volunteers, including students from Sparta High School; her husband, who drives the pantry truck; and Laura from the Branchville pantry, here for excess supplies. Her voice rises when needed, but she doesn't yell.

In another room, with marching orders in hand, volunteers buzz around a maze of tables topped with food and beverage supplies.



Left to right at Sparta Ecumenical Food Pantry, Sparta High students Marcelle Mendiburu, Katie Carrigan, Anthony Cortese, Joseph Stevens and Kevin Elzind.

Heather Church is the coordinator for Sparta High's volunteers.

"The first day we were able to go back, the happiness was palpable," Church said of her students' return to the pantry after Covid-19 protocols were in place.

"For students who often ask for help, being able to give back is priceless," Church continued, with pride in her voice and smiling eyes above her mask.

Tall, broad and eager to help is Sparta High student Amir Lalji, 19.

"I like working at the food pantry," Lalji said behind his camo mask. "It helps a lot of people," he said, showing a soft side.

**Sparta****High coordinator Heather Church, 30, and student Amir Lalji.**

Four hundred seniors is a lot of people to feed for a small operation like the Sparta pantry.

Nationwide, however, efforts by private food banks will need government help if the estimated 54 million people in the country who face food insecurity are going to receive meaningful relief.

But Macchio's concern is local, and she remains optimistic about the pantry's ability to continue to make a difference in its corner of the world.

"When we need something, it usually shows up," she said, remembering her 13 years at the pantry, while simultaneously expressing her hope for the future. After all, she is a multitasker.

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