



With SNAP benefits set to expire, local private businesses step up with donation drives and giveaways

Around Allegheny County, restaurants, convenience stores and even a vet clinic are trying to fill the void as the government shutdown continues

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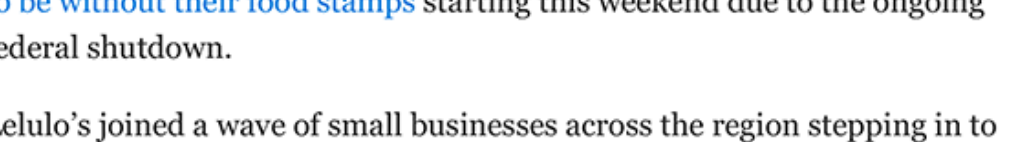


The entrance to Lelulo's Pizzeria looked more like a food pantry than a restaurant early this week.

Tables were lined with jars of baby food, Snack Packs, loaves of bread and canned goods while refrigerators were stuffed with dairy, vegetables and meat Monday afternoon.

Shuffling in and out of the pizzeria was owner Patyn McCune, hauling bags of groceries from her car.

The restaurant is usually closed on Mondays. But Ms. McCune posted a message on the restaurant's Facebook page inviting anyone who needed help to come in and take what they needed between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. — no questions asked.



Her gesture came as about 300,000 Pittsburgh-area residents are preparing to be without their food stamps starting this weekend due to the ongoing federal shutdown.

Lelulo's joined a wave of small businesses across the region stepping in to help families left in limbo. They're also all a part of a wider network of food access points that have become lifelines for many households this month, from long-running pantries at churches to public fridges stocked with free items.

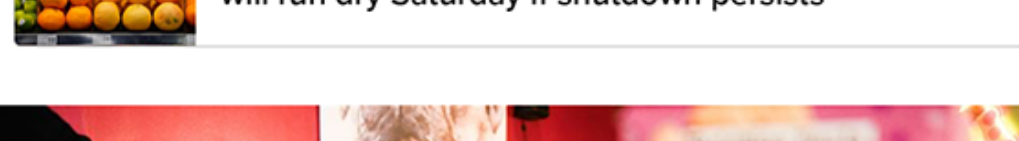
"I was to food banks and everything else as a kid, and my parents were on food stamps. If we didn't have that, I don't know how we would have survived," Ms. McCune said. "I'm grateful that I'm not in the position that I was anymore, but it just makes me really upset that this is the world that we're living in right now."

For Christyle Wright, 23, the pizzeria's effort meant a day she didn't have to worry about how to feed her two children, both younger than 2 years old.

When Ms. Wright, who is homeless, found out her November benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, wouldn't come through, she began scrambling.

"We really depend on it, and we don't have family that's willing to help us, so we're just kind of gonna be stuck if it doesn't come," Ms. Wright said. "I'm worried I won't be able to feed my babies."

That's when she saw the post on Lelulo's Facebook page, and she reached out asking if there would be any formula or milk available. Ms. McCune said she would make sure there was.



Ms. Wright was one of at least 50 people who left with food from the shop Monday, many of them mothers.

In addition to the tables with donations, Ms. McCune is also offering free kids' meals until further notice.

From pizza to chicken tenders to grilled cheese, families can come in and order meals for their children without having to show proof of their enrollment in SNAP, i.e. an Electronic Benefit Transfer card.

"One common factor, I think, is that kids are important and people don't want kids to go hungry," she said. "And I'm hoping this creates a chain reaction in other areas and people just want to help."

Communities rally as demand rises

Jennifer Vitale, who runs the Green Tree Italian restaurant Cucina Vitale with her husband, Frank, has also seen a growing need.

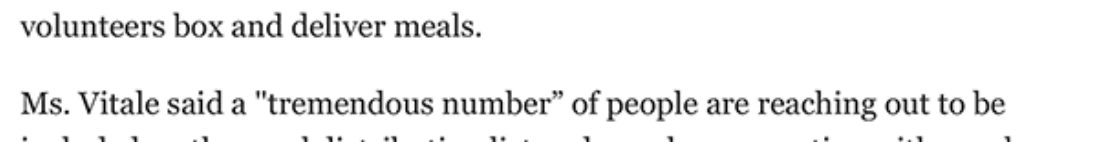
In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vitales started the Harvest of Hope Pittsburgh, a nonprofit whose fundraising efforts it to offer free meals on Thanksgiving. They use their restaurant kitchen to prepare food, and volunteers box and deliver meals.

Ms. Vitale said a "tremendous number" of people are reaching out to be included on the meal distribution list and are also connecting with nearby churches that are holding sign-ups to relay.

"Our goal was initially to prepare and serve 500 meals, but we expect that number to be doubled," Ms. Vitale said.

If SNAP benefits don't come through in December, either, the Vitales plan to continue fundraising efforts so they can also host a similar event on Christmas.

"This isn't about political parties or our differences. We should be helping one another," Ms. Vitale said. "We need more unity and less division. Division is why people are at risk of losing their SNAP benefits right now."



Marita Garrett, founder of the Free Store in Wilkensburg, said she was already seeing increased demand in the months before the shutdown.

"Prior to this year, we on average would serve around 110 community members every Saturday at the FreeStore Wilkensburg," she said. "That number is closer to 150."

From 1 to 3 p.m. on the first Friday of every month, the Free Store in Wilkensburg also holds its Fresh Market, where it distributes produce from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank.

Typically, around 150 to 200 households are served during the distribution, but Ms. Garrett expects that number to be higher during their Nov. 7 event as nonprofits feel the brunt of the government shutdown and state budget impasse.

"People are already hanging on by a thread and anxious," she said.

Unexpected need — and help

Pennsylvania is approaching four months without a state budget — an impasse that has strained county governments, school districts and social service programs. The deadline for the budget was July 1.

Among the steady stream of people at Lelulo's on Monday was Shanna Jenkins, 44, a single mother of three who came by with fruit to donate.

She hadn't expected to leave with anything herself, but she's been feeling the effects of inflation for months — grocery prices rising, bills stacking up.

It's forced her to work an extra 50 hours a week and consider a second job.

But the overtime has put her income higher than the eligibility limit for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, known as WIC.

"That's going to be a deficit for me come November," she said. "Now the money that I didn't spend on milk, eggs, cheese, bread and cereal, I now have to factor back into the budget."



As the demand for resources rises, so do the inquiries from community members wanting to help.

Ms. Garrett said she's been getting up to 10 inquiries per week for volunteers wanting to help — up from the usual two or three, since the shutdown began Oct. 1.

"Our capacity is limited, so it allows us to continue operating our programs to meet the heightened needs," she said.

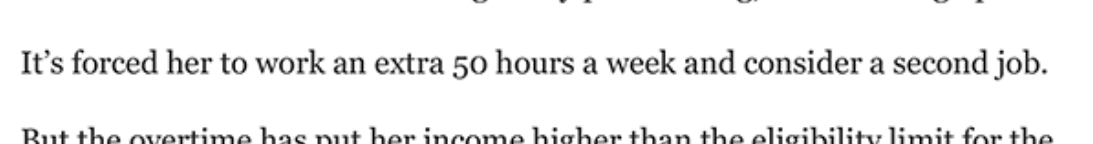
"Community is all any of us have. That is why it is so crucial we build and find our community more than ever."

Some of the efforts have come from unexpected places.

At the White Oak Veterinary Clinic, practice manager Angela Miller and her staff decided to launch a food drive with resources for both people and pets until Oct. 31.

"On my way into work, I just kept thinking about how stressful it must be for someone to worry about feeding themselves or their pets," Ms. Miller said.

Within 24 hours of posting about the drive, people in the community began dropping off donations, and the clinic's waiting area was soon filled with canned goods and bags of dog food.



Community Support During the Government Shutdown We understand that times are incredibly tough for many right now. In the spirit of compassion and community, White Oak Veterinary Clinic will be collecting non-perishable food donations for both people and pets to support the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank from now through October 31.

"The community response so far has been incredibly heartwarming," Ms. Miller said. "Some have even offered to spread the word or bring in extra items to support others. It's a beautiful reminder of how generous and caring our community truly is."

Ms. Miller said she hopes to continue offering drives and other resource-based events as the shutdown drags on.

"Moments like this show the strength of our community," she said. "They remind us that even in difficult times, people come together with kindness, generosity and a willingness to lift one another up. It's incredibly moving to witness."

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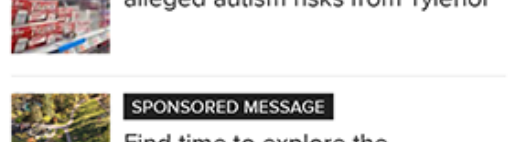
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