

HIDDEN Hunger

1 in 5 Westchester residents—roughly 200,000 of us—are hungry or at risk for hunger. How is that possible? And what are we doing about it?

By Kate Stone Lombardi
Featuring photography by Stefan Radtke



On a cold, rainy Tuesday in Port Chester, the savory scent of beef stew wafts across a kitchen of a community center.

“Ladies first!” a volunteer calls out. A half-dozen elderly women shuffle to the front, while the others who have been waiting—white, Latino, and African American men of all ages—form a line behind them. Soon, almost 70 people are sitting communally in front of steaming trays of stew, yellow rice, soup, salad, and fruit. For some, this hot lunch will be their last meal until the next day.

Caritas of Port Chester, the nonprofit agency that runs this soup kitchen, has been hopping since before 7 am, when a light breakfast, catering to the day laborers, is served. “If they’re lucky enough to get a job, they should at least have a cup of coffee and a roll in their stomachs to go for the day,” says Patricia Hart, a volunteer and board president at Caritas. Later, a warm breakfast is served to others who don’t have work—some of them homeless. Others sitting in the warm kitchen can only afford to share living space, renting the use of an apartment, or even just a bed, for a few hours a day.

Meanwhile, in the Center’s gymnasium, volunteers set up the food pantry. By the 9 am opening, the line is out the door and clients, many of them young mothers with small children, are choosing groceries, produce, and bread. Families also sort through free clothing and shoes, organized by size and gender on tables in the middle of the room.

That same evening, 20 miles to the north, a busy distribution is unfolding at The Mount Kisco Interfaith Food Pantry. Dozens of



At Caritas of Port Chester, hungry Westchester residents can get a warm breakfast and shop for groceries at its food pantry. For many, the breakfast may be their only meal that day.

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—Ann Natale, past board president, The Mount Kisco Interfaith Food Pantry

clients in the waiting area listen as a visiting nutritionist stresses the importance of fresh fruits and vegetables. The timing is perfect—The Food Bank for Westchester delivered five huge pallets of fresh produce to the pantry that morning. Down the hall, eight women gather around an instructor who is talking about how to read food labels. The bilingual class is part of a free, onsite eight-week nutrition course that Cornell Cooperative Extension presents at the pantry.

Many people visiting this pantry, located on the ground floor of a church, came directly from minimum-wage jobs in local supermarkets or pharmacies, others from outdoor labor. “Most people would be surprised to know that the vast majority of our clients have jobs,” says Ann Natale, past board president and longtime volunteer at the Mount Kisco pantry. “People are underemployed in part-time jobs with low pay or doing seasonal work. They’re chronically underemployed, and, so, chronically food-insecure.”

As families move through the food distribution area, set up to simulate a grocery store, they pick up a bag of fresh produce be-



YONKERS SPECIAL DELIVERY

A pantry volunteer and a few homeless helpers deliver much-needed food to some of Yonkers' neediest residents.

"Bet you didn't think you'd be riding today with an ex-cop and a bank robber," quips Brian from the back of the battered, navy blue van. We're in the driveway at Shepherd's Flock, a faith-based residence in Southwest Yonkers for homeless men.

The van is packed with grocery bags filled with fresh produce, pasta, lentils, and cans of soup and vegetables. Alex, a shelter resident, is driving. Jeff Meyer rides shotgun. At 6'2" with clear blue eyes, Jeff looks every inch the retired police officer he is. Jeff now volunteers to run this ministry. And yes, Brian, 53, served time for bank robbery. Homeless for most of his adult life, Brian says that distributing food "is a blessing. Instead of taking, to give back feels good."

Two minutes after the van pulls out, Jeff's cell rings.

"It's your next door neighbor and you don't know it. It's the person next to you in church...[it's people] who say, 'I don't know how I got here. I can't believe I need a food pantry to survive.'"

—Jeff Meyer (right), food pantry volunteer



"Yes, Miguel? Where do you live? Do you have a family, Miguel? You have no food? I'll do my best to get to you today. Take care, buddy."

But first, he needs to get to Marsha, before she leaves for chemotherapy. Marsha needs her nutrients, and greens are expensive, Jeff explains. Like everyone else that Shepherd's Flock will visit that morning, Marsha lives in Yonkers public housing. She opens the door wearing a bright red cap and a long dress. "God bless you!" she says,



As the van cuts through Southwest Yonkers, Brian points out places where the homeless sleep—under a bridge, under playground equipment, on certain park benches. Sometimes he brings groceries to these men. "Winter is the worst when you're homeless," he says, shaking his head.

Next stop is the emergency delivery to Miguel, but no one answers Jeff's knock. He leaves six bags in front of the door, offering a prayer to keep the food safe.

Alesha is a new client with six kids. It's hard to tell how many people live in the walk-up apartment. Two toddlers wearing only diapers hover by the door. As the men leave, the toddlers can be heard shouting, "We can eat! We can eat."

Jeff sighs. "You know what that is? It's the end of the month. The food stamps have run out."

And so the morning goes. There'll be a visit with Pat L., who has lost his sight to diabetes. Another to a woman with MS. Another to a grandmother with small children wrapped around each leg. Another to a mother of four, whose Orchard Avenue neighborhood feels like a no-man's land, with no supermarket or street life.

giving Jeff a hug as she takes the food.

The van heads next to what Jeff describes as "a rough area, gang infested." He should know. Three guys once tried to rob Jeff on an afternoon delivery. Alex pulls the van up next to an aging building. Jeff seeks out Ronny.

Ronny is one of the people Jeff trusts to distribute food to others. Sporting a brown wool cap and no laces in his high-top sneakers, Ronny, 63, is a lifelong Yonkers resident.

"I give this food to people I know really need it," he explains, as the bags are loaded into his basement apartment. "Some people are ashamed to ask. But if you need it, you need it."

The van, empty of groceries, heads back to Shepherd's Flock. In two hours, Jeff, Alex, and Brian covered 17 miles and distributed 100 bags of groceries. On Monday, they'll pick up left over produce from the Pleasantville Farmer's Market, and give that away too.

For Jeff, volunteering is a full-time job. He also runs a food pantry at the Ridgeway Alliance Church, in White Plains, where he worships.

"My friends from my police job say, 'you're out of your mind. What are you doing in South Yonkers?'" Jeff says. "I tell them, when I retired, I literally prayed. 'Lord, I want to do something that really matters.' And this is what I do. I wouldn't change my life now for anything."

—KSL

fore selecting non-perishable staples, eggs, frozen meats, and donated bread, with quantities based on the size of their household. The next morning, the pantry opens again, available for those who can't make the evening hours.

Meanwhile, in Southwest Yonkers, an aging blue van is cruising through the city streets, delivering free groceries to people who can't make it to a pantry. Among them that day are a woman with cancer, a woman with multiple sclerosis, and a blind man. Some recipients are elderly—too frail and sometimes too frightened to walk in their neighborhoods. Still others are single mothers, who as the end of the month approaches, have run out of food stamps... and food. The pantry delivery team is an eclectic mix—a retired police officer volunteering to coordinate the run, and residents of Shepherd's Flock, a homeless residence in the neighborhood. (See *Special Delivery*, page 48.)

These three programs feed more than 2,000 people in any given week. And that's only a tiny snapshot of both the need and the network of help sustaining people who are hungry in Westchester. The Food Bank for Westchester, the core of the effort to address local hunger, supports 160 agencies that run 265 feeding programs in the County. They range from tiny pantry closets open once a month to large soup kitchens that feed hundreds of men, women, and children each week.

Hunger in the Suburbs

If you live in certain parts of Westchester, it's hard to wrap your head around the fact that so many people here don't have enough to eat. How many? The Food Bank estimates that one in five residents are "food-insecure"—meaning that they don't always have enough money to buy adequate nutritious food. The figure, based on population, income levels, and cost of living in Westchester, means roughly 200,000 people in the county are hungry or at risk for hunger.

Actual numbers of people using feeding programs are harder to come by. In addition to food pantries and soup kitchens, The Food Bank supplies food for programs in senior centers, low-income childcare centers, and after-school programs. The Kraft Mobile Food Pantry, designed to reach "food deserts"—places where nutritious, affordable food is scarce—was launched in 2013 and is out

HIDDEN Hunger

almost every day. Tracking people who use multiple pantries is challenging, and there aren't any agencies overseeing individual anti-hunger efforts in Westchester outside The Food Bank system. Under The Food Bank umbrella, 33 percent of people relying on feeding programs are children and 51 percent are seniors. Roughly 68 percent are female and 41 percent of households have at least one employed adult.

It's also unclear where these patrons fall on the income scale. The Food Bank discourages feeding programs from means testing, or setting an income limit to qualify for food assistance. The accepted wisdom is that men, women, and children willing to line up in church basements, parking lots or wherever else food is being distributed, are likely in need of it. Nor do most feeding programs look at who is receiving SNAP benefits (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps). But the majority of programs do limit how much food individual clients can receive, either by the size of their families or the frequency of their visits, or both. Agencies also limit the catchment area they'll serve.

Hunger is an increasingly suburban problem, says Ellen Lynch, president and CEO of the Food Bank for Westchester. Mirroring a national trend, most Westchester feeding programs—pantries, soup kitchens, and other outreaches—have transitioned from “emergency providers” to regularly supplementing residents' diets. Lynch cites a Brookings Institute study revealing that since 2000, suburban poverty has increased by 65 percent, almost double the growth rate of urban areas.

As low-rent areas in New York City have become gentrified, poorer people have been pushed into bordering suburbs, Lynch explains. New immigration patterns also have an effect. Traditionally, people immigrated to large cities. But today many people arriving from other countries have family already settled in suburban areas. They're moving directly into areas like Port Chester and Mount Kisco, and tend to start at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Suburban seniors, many of them lifelong county residents, are a growing constituency of people using feeding programs, says Lynch. With the high cost of living in Westchester, the elderly on fixed incomes are struggling. Lynch also points to “transitional poverty”—often the people who never imagined needing help to feed their families.

“These are the folks who always worked, and made something like \$58,000 a year, enough to have an apartment and a car,” Lynch says. “But they weren't saving a whole lot. They were getting by. If they lose their job because of an economic downturn, they run



The Food Bank for Westchester is the nexus of hunger-relief efforts in the County, supporting 160 agencies that run 265 feeding programs. Its Kraft Mobile Food Pantry (below) serves residents in areas where healthy food is scarce.



The 2008 recession hit the “transitional poverty” group particularly hard, rendering many in need of feeding assistance. “These are the folks who always worked, and made something like \$58,000 a year. But they weren't saving a whole lot...And [now] they're in trouble. It happens very quickly to people you wouldn't suspect.”

—Ellen Lynch (above), CEO,
The Food Bank for Westchester

WHAT FOOD PANTRIES ARE TOO POLITE TO TELL YOU

No one in the nonprofit world wants to alienate well-meaning donors or volunteers. But here's the lowdown on what food pantries would really like you to know:

THEY'D RATHER HAVE YOUR MONEY THAN YOUR FOOD. Most feeding programs buy food from The Food Bank for Westchester, where—thanks to bulk buying and government subsidies—their buying power is greatly increased. A \$1 donation can usually buy \$4 of food.

NOT ALL FOOD DRIVES ARE CREATED EQUAL. With the best intentions, schools, employers, and businesses ask folks to drop off excess canned goods for the needy. But collections of heavy, random cans create headaches for volunteer staff, who need to inspect, sort, and store them. Canned food is relatively cheap and can be purchased more efficiently at The Food Bank.

BETTER BET: Targeted food drives. Ask your local pantry for one or two items they need and collect those.

DO NOT DROP OFF EXPIRED FOOD. If you wouldn't feed it to your own family, don't give it to others. And no specialty items. "We don't need your out-of-date capers," one pantry manager quipped.

YOUR KID'S COMMUNITY-SERVICE REQUIREMENT ISN'T THEIR PRIORITY. Don't drop off your teenager at a pantry in the middle of a busy distribution because he/she needs to fulfill a requirement. Volunteers are great! But check to see when and what kind of help is needed. —KSL



through their savings in two months and move on to credit cards. Maybe they get a new job in six months paying a little less, but now they also have a big credit card bill. And they're in trouble. It happens very quickly to people you wouldn't suspect."

Lynch notes that the 2008 recession hit this group particularly hard. People who were making ends meet with second and even third jobs in the service sector—limousine drivers, waiters at country clubs—have not seen those jobs come back. Just three years after the economic crisis, white-collar unemployment had doubled from its pre-recession level, according to the Economic Policy Institute. And those who could get back into the work force often took lower-wage positions.

"We got hit so hard in 2008 and a lot of people never recovered from that," adds Jeff Meyer, who runs food pantries in White Plains and Yonkers. "You know what I see? People who've always worked are really struggling. Let's face it: When you live in Westchester County, and you're making \$10, \$15 an hour, and your rent is \$1,200 a month, how far does that go?"

Meeting the Need

How does the whole food distribution system work in Westchester? Scattered in geography, size, and resources, most pantries, soup kitchens, and student backpack programs are part of a network working with The Food Bank for Westchester. The Food Bank itself occupies a 36,688 square-foot warehouse in Elmsford. It does not directly serve clients, but is the source of 95 percent of the food that our local feeding programs use. In 2014, it provided agencies 7.6 million pounds of food, which translates into 6.3 million meals.

Most of that food isn't free to feeding programs. But The Food Bank, one of eight in New York State, administers New York State grants to feeding agencies to defray their food purchases. And because the Food Bank buys in bulk at government-subsidized prices, the food in its warehouse is far cheaper than that at the grocery store. For every \$1, feeding programs can buy roughly \$4 worth of food.

Where do feeding programs get their money? Contrary to what is often assumed, the government is only one of many sources of support. Many local agencies—particu-

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The Mount Kisco Interfaith Food Pantry is set up to mimic a grocery store; users can shop for fresh produce in addition to non-perishable staples. Free classes help educate clients—most of whom hold minimum-wage jobs—about nutrition.

larly larger ones—fundraise in their own communities and rely on private donations. Some pantries and soup kitchens are supported by religious congregations. Local businesses also give—either with monetary or food donations. Better staffed agencies apply for grants to supplement the cost of food.

Once the food is purchased, it is distributed throughout the county in church basements, community centers, storefronts, and anywhere else a program is based. On any given Friday in Westchester, someone is packing food into backpacks to give to school kids who might not otherwise have enough to eat over the weekend. Others are driving around their communities, delivering much-needed groceries. Still others are volunteering in pantries, handing out food they've bought with money they've raised from their own communities. Most feeding programs are independent and run by volunteers, though larger programs have some paid staff. Many pantries began small and have grown to respond to the increasing need.

"Every single one of these places has a story about how it started," explains Lynch. "And it's always a volunteer who has some compassion about somebody in that neighborhood and then connects with other like-minded people willing

Profiles in Hunger

Pat L. likes to cook Italian food. It's his heritage, he says. Did he ever think he'd need a food pantry? "Never. I was brought up to be independent," he says. In a black hoodie and sweat pants, Pat described the days when he managed a chain of grocery stores. For a while, he drove a limo, and Pat is happy to list the many celebrities he squired around New York. But diabetes took its toll on the 50-year-old. First, he lost his kidneys. Then he lost his vision. "I used to make good money, and if it wasn't for the fact that I got sick, I wouldn't have to depend on anyone," he says.

The father of three girls, Pat gets deliveries from Shepherd's Flock in Yonkers. The food warms up the house, he says. Pat means it literally. Not only do the aromatic scents of cooking create a cozy atmosphere, but money not spent on food goes to pay for heat. "At the end of the month, finances are very, very low," he says. Pat describes the deliveries as "a Godsend." "Knowing that they're there for my kids and myself, it's just a load off of my mind," he explains. "It keeps me from going to sleep crying, wondering where my next meal will come from. It's not just people who are rich living in Westchester."



Isabella A. (left) is in a rush. She's out of breath as she explains that she'd been trying to squeeze in some exercise to shed her post-baby weight. Bright-eyed Alejandra just turned 7 months old; her other child, Anabella, is 3. With a shy smile, Isabella apologizes that her English isn't as good as she wants it to be. She came to this country from the Dominican Republic seven years ago. Determined to improve, she's taking two different English classes, one at the Mount Kisco Library. That's where she learned about the nutrition course at the Mount Kisco Interfaith Food Pantry. Only when she arrived for class did she realize that an array of free food was also available.

"I came because I love to feed my family healthy," she says. "I'm breastfeeding, and I need to eat well, too. I love the vegetables, but in the nutrition class, she teaches us how to use the cans, too."

Isabella's husband works full-time as a maintenance man at a nearby synagogue, but his salary cannot support his family of four. To help, she's started her own small business making hair accessories. But Isabella has bigger ambitions. She doesn't want to use the pantry any longer than necessary. Her hope is to someday be able to afford college. Her dream is to become a nutritionist.



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Christine K. lives just three blocks from The Westchester, the upscale White Plains mall, but she doesn't shop there. Sitting on her worn corduroy sofa, the soft-spoken 62-year-old didn't always need help making ends meet. She's worked as a word processor, a nurse's aid, a receptionist, and at CVS. But last year, Christine was hospitalized with an anxiety disorder. By the time she was released, her old job was filled. That's when Christine, who grew up in Yonkers, began visiting the pantry at the Ridgeway Alliance Church in White Plains. The extra food means "I just don't have to worry about every penny," says Christine. Through the pantry, she's even expanded her culinary horizons, tasting—and liking—kale for the first time.

Wanting to give back, Christine began volunteering at the pantry, helping to shelve food. (Throughout the county, many people who use food pantries also volunteer their time there.) But just as she began rebuilding her life, Christine was struck by a car while walking home from church. Now disabled, she gets home deliveries from another pantry volunteer. Christine keeps one Bible on her coffee table and another by her side. "The caring people make all the difference in this world," she says.

to give up their time. There's no money hanging around. These are people who are going to get this work done no matter what."

The Changing Face of Hunger

The Great Hunger Memorial, commemorating the suffering of Irish people during the potato famine, sits in V.E. Macy Park in Ardsley. The figures are gaunt, and an overturned basket depicts potatoes turning into skulls. But that's not what hunger looks like today. It may seem counterintuitive, but there's a link between people who are food-insecure and people who are obese. Fresh produce and lean proteins tend to be the most expensive foods at the grocery store, and families who are struggling tend to buy cheap, but filling, foods that are starchy and fatty. Though they may look well fed, many people, particularly children, are missing vital nutrients to help them remain healthy and strong, says Lynch.

That's why hunger-relief agencies in Westchester are putting such a strong emphasis on fresh produce, healthier choices, and nutrition education. "Easy, prepared food is so much more expensive," says Maria Bronzi, The Food Bank board president. "They haven't been taught not to buy the chicken nuggets. That educational piece is so important." The Food Bank has even launched its own farming program at five different sites. Other projects include a Senior Grocery Program, a Back Pack Program, and a Kids Care Program, all with an eye toward getting nutritious food to the most vulnerable populations.

The Food Bank is also looking toward the future. Lynch worries about the aging network of volunteers who currently keep all those programs going. Will younger residents step up to replace them? And she knows feeding people is not enough. A new mantra at the Food Bank is "Feed the Line, Shorten the Line." That is, at the same time you don't let people go hungry, you also try to encourage self-sufficiency through job training, education and more, so that they'll no longer need to be in that line.

Meanwhile, for those on the frontlines of fighting hunger, February may be the cruelest month. Charitable giving from the holidays has tapered off and the "winter surge" is in full force. Seasonal workers have no income. Fuel costs force choices between heating and eating. And school closings mean kids don't have access to reduced or free school lunches. Across Westchester, 34 percent of public-school students—or one in three—qualify for subsidized meals. But in cities like Yonkers, 77 percent of children are affected; in Port Chester, 61 percent.

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HUNGER BY THE NUMBERS

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vide food for them," says Bronzi.

Feeding programs across the county are seeing an increase in demand. And the divide between those who hand out food and those who receive it is not as large as you might imagine.

"The people who need help—it's your next door neighbor and you don't know it. It's the person next to you in church who wears a nice suit who you wouldn't suspect, but that person's Social Security check doesn't cut it," says Meyer. "I've run into so many clients who've worked their whole lives that look at me and say, 'I don't know how I got here. I can't believe I need a food pantry to survive.'"

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