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128,000 Plates, One Mission Inside New Jersey's Food Brigade

By STACEY FEINTUCH

People are surprised to find out that The Food Brigade has only existed for five years. That's because they're operating on the same level as organizations that have been around for 40 to 50 years.

The Food Brigade Inc. is a nonprofit whose mission is to provide food – in the form of both prepared meals and fresh and packaged foods – to local families and individuals dealing with hunger and food insecurity. Volunteers help with food acquisition, transport, preparation, distribution and delivery.

They helped feed 128,000 New Jersey residents in 2023/2024, including around 40,000 children.

“To be afraid that you’re not going to be able to feed your family or yourself if you’re elderly or disabled is one of the most stressful things someone can go through,” says Karen Benevento DeMarco, president of Food Brigade.

She says it’s rewarding to help alleviate some of that stress and help ease their minds, giving them one less thing to worry about.



"They know that people here have their back and will help them make it through the tough times."

The Food Brigade runs a free community market in Bergen County in Dumont as well as Hudson and Passaic counties for qualified New Jersey residents. What makes these markets unique compared to "traditional" food pantries is that they resemble a grocery store. Clients make appointments in advance using their online scheduling system. They come to the market at their scheduled appointment time, enter and scan their Shopper Card, grab a shopping

cart and then start shopping from the supermarket-style shelving. This process avoids long lines and wait times, where you're waiting to see if you can get a limited supply of food, which can be demeaning and stressful.

"Few things are more stressful than not having enough food to feed your family or being forced to have to make a choice between buying food or paying your utility bill," says DeMarco. "We do everything we can to make our guests' experience in receiving food assistance safe, pleasant and

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stress-free. We don't see ourselves as being in the food assistance business; we see ourselves as being in the customer service business."

At the market, clients aren't handed a one-size-fits-all prepackaged bag or box. Instead, they choose items they want, which are nutritious (fresh produce, baked goods, dairy products and frozen meat and seafood) rather than typical canned and packaged non-perishables you see at traditional food pantries. They help guests make healthier food choices.

"Our philosophy is that there is much more to operating a food pantry than merely giving out food: how that service is performed is just as important as the physical act of distributing food," says DeMarco. "All our guests are treated with dignity, respect and kindness, in a welcoming, stress-free environment. We seek to normalize and remove the stigma from the food assistance system in New Jersey. We want to feed not just their bellies, but their hearts as well."

They plan to expand county-by-county, going where the need is the greatest, says DeMarco.

Addressing Food Waste

The Food Brigade is also doing something about the 1.5 million tons of food wasted each year in the state. In 2024, they launched a food rescue program. Here, they pick up unused, excess and "short-dated" food from supermarkets, wholesalers and big-box retailers. The food is perfectly fit for human consumption. They're rescuing this food before it ends up in landfills and redirecting it to New Jersey residents in need. In 2024, they rescued roughly 148 tons of food.

"Donating to The Food Brigade is good for the environment," says DeMarco.

The Food Brigade also periodically provides restaurant-prepared meals to unhoused New Jerseyans and to local families in need due to disaster. They distribute infant and adult diapers and diaper wipes to registered clients. The Food Brigade periodically distributes supermarket gift cards to registered clients. Annually, The Food Brigade distributes turkeys at Thanksgiving time.

They also distribute meals and groceries from their pantry location. Here, families in need place online food orders in their virtual storefront. They then pick up their order at their scheduled appointment times. At the same time, food is loaded into cars by volunteer drivers. They deliver food to those who can't travel to their distribution site.

"Hunger doesn't sleep, so neither does The Food Brigade," says DeMarco.

History

The Food Brigade's roots trace back almost 30 years. Cofounder Carmine DeMarco first became active as a volunteer in feeding and housing the homeless in the early 1990s. A few years later, Karen, his wife, joined him. The pair became periodic coordinators at a shelter for homeless families in Englewood. After the shelter closed, they continued volunteering for that organization by periodically preparing and serving meals at the Bergen County Shelter in Hackensack and serving as overnight hosts at satellite shelters.

During a family health crisis in 2017, the DeMarcos were fortunate to have a friend who organized a "meal train," where their neighbors provided them with nightly meals. Wanting to "pay it forward," the DeMarcos formed the Dumont Meal Brigade, coordinating volunteers to provide homecooked meals to local families who were going through unemployment, illness, injury or other struggles.

In 2020, with the COVID lockdown, DeMarco began cooking meals for community members in need and senior citizens on a fixed income. The DeMarcos also recruited and coordinated volunteers to provide dinner to the homeless through the Walk-In Dinner Program in Hackensack multiple times.

Wanting to expand their service to the hungry and food insecure, the DeMarcos formed The Food Brigade Inc. as a public charity. The scale of the group's food-relief efforts expanded dramatically with the help of Trustee Ifraz Ilyas. She introduced the DeMarcos to large-scale bulk distribution of produce and dairy, and the church council and congregation of Calvary United Methodist Church

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in Dumont, who provided a staging area for The Food Brigade's operations.

When their organization began, like most food pantry operators, they saw their role as simply that of an emergency food provider. However, they quickly realized that there needs to be much more to operating food pantries than just giving out food to people. That realization caused them to become transformative in the lives of our neighbors who come to them for help rather than merely transactional.

"We didn't set out planning to found a nonprofit charity, let alone one that has grown to have such a regional impact," says DeMarco. "We knew we couldn't stop what we were doing because the need was so great. So, we continued to grow to meet the need. That's how it evolved and turned into what it is today."

While it's helpful to distribute food, DeMarco says doing so doesn't solve the root problems of food insecurity. That's why they're incorporating services such as SNAP enrollment, job training, budgeting workshops, ESL and more.

"Rather than measuring our impact by how many people we feed or how many pounds of food we distribute, our goal is to measure how many people LEAVE us and no longer need to receive food assistance from us," she says. "We want to move from being transactional to being transformative in people's lives."

The Food Brigade is located at 185 West Madison Ave. in Dumont. Visit them at foodbrigade.org or call them at (201) 614-4414 to learn more.

