

Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens Overrun by People in Need of Food

BY: BRANDON SAPIENZA

As millions across the United States lose their jobs stemming from the widespread economic shutdown due to the novel coronavirus, (COVID-19) many of those in need are flocking to food banks around the country. In New York City, one particular food bank in Downtown Brooklyn is seeing a need for food unlike ever before.

Catholic Charities of Brooklyn & Queens (CCBQ), an arm of the ministry efforts of the Archdiocese of New York, typically makes about 35 baskets filled with food for a week for residents of the community in need. Amidst some of the poorest economic conditions not seen since the Great Depression, that number has nearly tripled with over 105 baskets being prepared and distributed every Thursday.



“We’ve had a large influx of people coming in,” said Robert Spiro, a security officer at the Downtown Brooklyn Catholic Charities office. “It’s been really hard to turn people away and tell them we have no food left to give them, but unfortunately, we just have such a high demand and lowering supplies.”

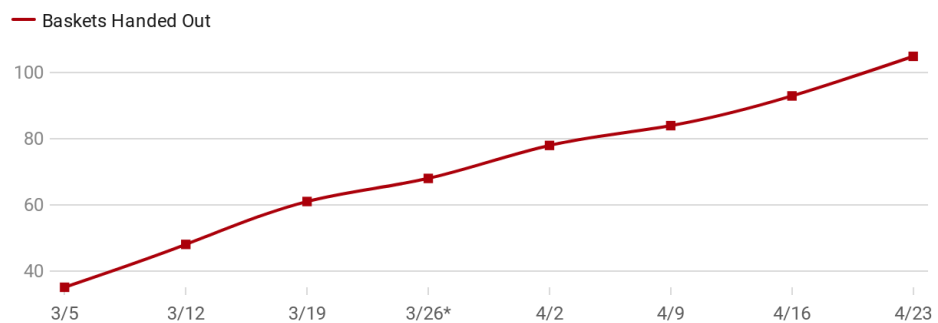
From what has been seen on lines outside the office located on Joralemon Street, most of the people on line are not regulars, but were close to once being so.

“I worked and everything, I didn’t make much but we still need to worry about not putting food on the table,” explained Mark Young. “I got laid off from a little mom and pop store I worked in, and now I’m on unemployment. I have a wife and a daughter to feed, rent to pay, so if I can get some help by coming here, I’ll take it.”

For now though, the small Downtown Brooklyn office grapples with ever-changing supply lines of food that facilitate the delivery of quality ingredients and food to the most amount of people.

Catholic Charities of Brooklyn & Queens Basket's Distributed

For the month of March and through April, the number of baskets of food handed out tripled in 7 weeks



* Indicates First Day Baskets Were Handed Out Following NY Governor Andrew Cuomo's Shelter in Place Executive Order

Chart: Brandon Sapienza • Source: Robert Spiro (CCBQ) • Created with Datawrapper

“We’re in contact with farmers right now because we just can’t keep up with the demand,” explained Mary Thompson, Head Secretary of CCBQ. “We see on the news how much food is going to waste across the country, and we want to help our farmers, and our friends in our community in their time of need.”

But there is no timeline for when any collaborations between farmers and Catholic Charities will be official, so for now, many more people will likely be turned away.

Among those walking away, nervous and afraid was Franklin Ramirez, a construction worker, husband, and father to three young children.

“I just can’t believe I can’t get any food,” Ramirez said while tearing up. “I haven’t received any unemployment and now I have to go back home to my family without much food left for the week. None of this can be happening right now.”

In many cases, the organization will hand out any leftover items, but for the purposes of safety and ensuring all baskets for the next week are filled, they have not been able to hand out anything except full baskets.

“I have to look out for the health and well-being of all the staff here,” said Sprio. If we have 95 food baskets available, I can only have a maximum of 95 guests in here per day. We have to

stagger them so the process is longer and the exposure to the virus is greater so we can't take risks."

Risks can't be taken at this particular office for sure as Rev. Msgr. Alfred P. LoPinto, a man in his 70's was diagnosed with

COVID-19 and admitted to the hospital for a few days. Msgr. LoPinto has since made a full recovery, but the news was shocking and prompted new changes be implemented for the safety of others including staggering as Spiro mentioned.

"We were very scared when we first heard the news," said Thompson. "But thankfully monsignor [LoPinto] recovered and hopefully he'll be back with us soon."

Catholic Charities across New York City continue to brace for the worst with new estimates from the mayor's office indicating that potentially two million New Yorkers can be food-compromised during and after the pandemic.

The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic Church backed organization in the United States has already pledged \$100,000 to the Archdiocese of New York to be dispersed across the five boroughs to organizations like Catholic Charities to purchase any food or supplies needed in the community.

"As an organization, we have provided vital support at key moments including during the 1918 flu pandemic, during two world wars and after natural disasters. Our 'Leave No Neighbor Behind' initiative continues that tradition, and we will work directly with food banks to help ensure that food reaches those most in need in communities from



coast to coast,” said Knights CEO Carl Anderson.

“We encourage those of all faiths and backgrounds who have the financial means to do so, kindly donate whatever it is they can to help us,” Thompson said. “It is so hard turning people away who need food so desperately, and with some help, we can turn fewer people away.”