

## LONG ISLAND

# Pantries struggle to feed more Long Islanders amid holidays, pandemic



The Mary Brennan INN Soup Kitchen in Hempstead has seen an increase in meals served during the pandemic, now they're trying to meet the needs during this holiday season. Credit: Newsday / Raychel Brightman

**By Robert Brodsky**

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The scent of chicken parmesan and turkey gumbo wafted through the kitchen of the Mary Brennan INN in Hempstead Tuesday morning as throngs of needy – and hungry – residents, including young children, waited patiently in the cold outside.

For Long Islanders living below the poverty line, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a harsh dichotomy – they are seeking out food pantries and soup kitchens in record numbers but are unable to stay and enjoy a hot meal inside with others.

Christmas would typically be among the busiest days of the year for soup kitchens, with crowds dining on chicken and turkey as holiday music pipes through speakers and Santa Claus distributes presents to youngsters.

But with the virus continuing to spread, soup kitchens are foregoing the festivities this year and will instead distribute grab-and-go meals or deliver groceries for families to prepare at home.

Meanwhile, the Mary Brennan INN, Long Island's largest soup kitchen, will close on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day for the first time in its 37-year history because their demand is so high — the facility estimates it will serve 200,000 meals this year, double 2019's — that it could create a public health hazard.

"Out of basic concern for the health and safety of the guests, and the fact that more people means you are more susceptible or more vulnerable to contracting this virus, we decided that it might not be the best idea to have so many people standing outside on those days," INN spokesperson Dana Lopez said.

The INN will distribute bags of groceries, sack lunches and ready-to-go full meals to residents through Thursday afternoon, all with a holiday flavor. But with the soup kitchen now serving up to 500 people per day, Lopez said the need has never been greater.

"We are seeing everyone," Lopez said. "We are seeing families. We are seeing individuals and people of all ages. Families with infants to school children. Students that are college age ... It really is everyone."

Bob Dolan of Island Park has been volunteering at the INN since March.

"It's tough to keep up," said Dolan, a retired NYPD officer, as he checked on a pasta with broccoli dish. "We are serving a lot of meals every day here. It's quite busy. ... There's definitely a need."

With massive job losses linked to the COVID-19 shutdowns, Long Island Cares Inc.-The Harry Chapin Food Bank's network of 374 local pantries, soup kitchens and emergency food programs have witnessed a 58% increase in those struggling with food insecurity, said Paul Pachter, the organization's chief executive officer.

This holiday season alone, Pachter said, an additional 220,000 Long Islanders have turned to the Hauppauge-based organization for emergency food assistance. The facility is distributing 70% more food compared with last year, according to Pachter.

"And it's not letting up any time soon," he said. "Businesses are closing every day and sending people on the food lines. That's really what's happening here. Nine out of 10 people that we speak to at the locations where we provide food — it's all about losing a job and the unemployment [insurance] is simply not enough."

Madeline Rubenstein, chairman of the North Shore Soup Kitchen in Glen Cove, said its reach has grown from serving about 150 people per week to about 2,000 currently, along with another 100 walk-ins.

On Christmas, the soup kitchen will deliver packages of groceries to about 460 families, with whole chickens, side dishes, holiday decorations and toys for those with young children included.

"It's disappointing that all these families need food," Rubenstein said. "I wish they didn't. ... It's an unprecedented time in our history. People are really hurting."



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