Mark and Lisa Haley, of Corning, know food insecurity. “My mom was a single parent with two kids to feed. It was tough. I grew up familiar with programs like WIC and reduced-price school lunch,” Lisa says.

Mark’s parents were disabled, and the family relied on assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs and food pantries. “As a child I didn’t understand the importance of these programs. But now, I have the opportunity to give back,” Mark says. “I could have been the kid who went hungry, and now I want to help make sure others don’t live that way.”

Mark and Lisa responded immediately when the Food Bank called on volunteers to pack emergency food boxes to distribute in response to
As we go to print in late May, our reality will change once this newsletter reaches you in June. The COVID-19 crisis has brought unprecedented need, and we are bracing ourselves for a long recovery. This pandemic has upended our community — our world — and demonstrated just how interconnected we all are.

In this time of uncertainty, I know we can always count on the commitment and dedication of so many of our Southern Tier neighbors who have been working tirelessly to ensure that the most vulnerable members of our community are fed. My team and I are inspired every day by so many examples of ordinary people doing extraordinary things to help others.

Your support is an integral part of this work and we appreciate your partnership in our efforts to plot a new course through uncharted territory. Thank you.

Natasha R. Thompson
President & CEO

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In April, Kimberly Andreine of Southport did something she never thought she would have to do. She needed help with food. So, she went to a Community Food Distribution at the Chemung County Fairgrounds.

“This was the very first time I have ever used Food Bank services — or any services, for that matter — but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been unable to work. I was turned down for unemployment. So, I finally decided to ask for some help,” she said.

Kimberly was laid off from her job as a patient services coordinator at a physical therapy practice when her employer closed temporarily. Kimberly says she was denied unemployment benefits because she didn’t earn enough in 2019 as a part-time cafeteria worker. And then, she took a leave of absence from her office job in the final months of the year as her husband, Armondo, was losing his battle with cancer.

“I was forced to move from the house we were renting together into a small studio apartment that I could afford alone, and now this COVID-19 pandemic shut down my office for the time being,” she said.

Through April, Kimberly lived off only her income tax refund and federal stimulus payment. She lost her job permanently in May. It was not easy for Kimberly to admit — even to herself — that she needed help.

“I am a person who was raised to be responsible and accountable for myself. The sudden and unexpected loss of income was paralyzing. Especially being a new widow all alone,” Kimberly says. “It was very difficult for me to ask for help. My aunt uses Food Bank services and she and my mother encouraged me and told me how to use the website to register for food distributions.”

Kimberly attended the drive-thru distribution in mid-April. The number of vehicles lined up to receive food shocked her. She hadn’t realized the need was so great.

“When I got home and unpacked my car, I literally cried with both relief and gratefulness. I was completely overwhelmed with the amount of nutritious food the Food Bank provided for free,” she says. “God bless the Food Bank for what you do to help the volume of people who would go hungry without your hard work and dedication.”

Our tax ID number is 20-8808059.

Stories and photos by Maria Strinni, special to the Food Bank
COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. The Haleys also volunteered at Community Food Distributions across our six-county service area, stepping up to help cars navigate the drive-thru distribution process.

The couple gave a donation from their business, Big Ink Tattoos and Piercing in Arnot Mall, and started volunteering regularly last fall.

“We wanted to feel like our contributions were helping feed kids like us,” Lisa says. “Spending time in the warehouse makes me feel connected to the people I’m helping, and knowing that the Food Bank can stretch our dollars to provide so many meals confirms they are the right choice for donations.”

Unfortunately, Big Ink, like so many other small businesses across the country, had to close operations by order of the State in mid-March, leaving their staff of nine without employment.

“I wasn’t prepared emotionally for this,” Lisa says. “The hardest thing for me was telling our staff that we had to close. With so many uncertainties, I had to assure my friends and family that we all would be okay, and that was incredibly difficult.”

Volunteering gave the Haleys a sense of purpose when the shutdown paused their livelihood.

“Considering our childhoods, we know that food insecurities effect more people than you realize. Many people in otherwise ‘normal’ situations struggle to provide their family meals. Some may be embarrassed or unlikely to accept help,” Mark says.

“Having a successful local business and a large social network, we have tried to make our service and donations public,” he adds. “Hopefully, those in our network who can help will be inspired to help. Likewise, those we know who may be struggling may find the Food Bank as a resource.”
Rapid Response: Shifting operations to meet unprecedented need

It all happened so quickly.

As the COVID-19 virus turned into a global pandemic and hit close to home, the Food Bank had to act fast, restructuring all operations to keep staff, volunteers, and clients safe while responding to a growing need for food.

New York State announced the first case of COVID-19 on March 1. Two weeks later, schools across the Southern Tier announced plans to close, and the State mandated closure of all schools and non-essential business on March 18.

After a frantic week of packing emergency food boxes, the Food Bank canceled volunteer shifts to keep volunteers and staff safe. Our Mobile Food Pantries abandoned client choice for drop-and-go delivery and then shut down indefinitely.

“We knew that if one of our staff contracted the virus, our operations would be threatened. And we could not let that happen,” said Natasha R. Thompson, Food Bank president and CEO.

Access to food became top of mind as businesses closed and many of our neighbors lost employment. Preparing to stay home, residents cleaned local stores out of milk, eggs, bread, and meats while others without the means to stock their shelves worried.

More than half of school age children are at risk of hunger when school is not in session and kids can’t access school meals. Our local school districts stepped up, with cafeteria heroes providing breakfast and lunches for pickup or delivery.

At the Food Bank, 50% of employees began to work from home and our production, warehouse, and distribution staff shifted into high gear.

With the help of community leaders, schools and agency partners, the Food Bank established food hubs in five counties. Our trucks delivered dry goods on pallets to these central locations where small teams of volunteers packed emergency food boxes that could feed a family of four for four days.

We encouraged neighbors in need to seek out their local food pantries, who reported a 56% increase in demand. Many of our partners increased their orders and shifted their services to a drive-up model; some even offered delivery service to homes.

Food Bank staff developed a pre-registration system for our drive-thru Community Food Distributions which can serve up to 500 households in a three-hour period. Hundreds of cars snaked through fairgrounds and parking lots to receive 50-60 lbs. of dry goods, dairy products, fresh produce and frozen meats. Clients drove through with popped trunks, notes of gratitude taped to their windows, mouthing “thank you” and holding their hands over their heart in gratitude.

Food supply chains became unstable, and we saw a tremendous decrease in donated product from manufacturers, retailers and growers. Our food sourcing team purchased 300% more wholesale product than usual.

We could not have responded so quickly and shifted our operations so dramatically without the incredible support and partnerships we have in our community. We will get through this together, stronger and better than before.