

Food banks could suffer

As needs on LI rise, Congress debates funding

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

BY OLIVIA WINSLOW

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On a busy Tuesday morning reserved for military veterans, several men, at least one accompanied by his wife, took turns filing down the aisle at Long Island Cares' Nassau Center for Collaborative Assistance in Freeport. They were grocery shopping at the center's food pantry.

They perused a freezer filled with frozen meats — Italian sausage, fish, pork chops and ham steaks. They paused before shelves filled with oranges and tomatoes, canned vegetables and canned fish, such as salmon, and more. Some made a beeline toward the shelves catering to the nutritional needs of their house pets.

It was, several said, a weekly shopping trip they try not to miss.

"I have a good experience every time I come," said Cyrus Council, 65, an Army vet from Freeport. "I have a lot of bills. I stretch my dollar" by coming to the pantry.

Increased community need

The weekly stop for groceries by Council and the other vets comes as officials with Long Island Cares — The Harry Chapin Regional Food Bank face increasing community need for emergency assistance amid concerns over lingering pandemic-related supply shortages, rising food insecurity and pending federal legislation.

"The long-term impacts of COVID, the inflation that's associated with it, supply chain disruptions" are all cause for concern, Michael Haynes, Long Island Cares' vice president for government relations, advocacy and social policy, told Newsday.

"As much as we want to be past COVID," Haynes said, "we're not fully past it."

He pointed to the most re-

cent Feeding America "Map the Meal Gap" study, which "showed that food insecurity increased from 2021 to 2024 by 58%. So we're still in it."

On Wednesday, Haynes joined others with Long Island Cares for a news conference at its Hauppauge office to note its increase in "food commodities" from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's emergency food assistance program, known by its acronym, TEFAP, in response to rising need, and to speak out against a bill proposed in Congress they said could delay future food shipments.

The food bank operates its own pantries — currently five, with a sixth scheduled to open later this year — as well as supplying 335 food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and more.

Through June of this year, officials with Long Island Cares said, the organization has distributed 2,373,317 pounds of federal food commodities, a 29% spike over the first half of 2023. For all of 2024, Long Island Cares projects it will receive 5,221,297 pounds of federal food commodities that include ground beef, chicken, salmon, catfish, milk, eggs, rice, apples, peaches, grapes and potatoes.

Moreover, Long Island Cares receives food from multiple sources, among them supermarket chains, corporations and food drives by community groups.

Support in lean times

"In 2022 we distributed 11,418,000 pounds of food," Peter Crescenti, Long Island Cares' spokesperson, said in an email. "That number jumped way up to 14,527,000 last year."

From January to July of 2023, according to Crescenti, the food bank distributed 7,757,250 pounds. During the same period this year, he said, the food bank distributed 9,095,211 pounds.

Count Navy veteran Kenneth Wolfe, 75, of Bellmore, among those who have looked to the food bank as a place to find support in lean times.

"This dramatically helps us. It gives me quality food and [being] with people who can help you," Wolfe said Tuesday on his grocery trip to the Freeport pantry. "They are very gener-



Vietnam War veteran John Gerbasio, 81, of Freeport, gets food once a week at the Long Island Cares Freeport food pantry.

ous, very giving. It saves an ample amount of money."

John Gerbasio, 81, of Freeport, who was with his wife, Christina, at the pantry, said they have a modest and pragmatic approach when it comes to picking food items.

"We only take what we need," Gerbasio said. "It helps our finances."

Household budgets stretched to the limit are a factor that has spurred more Long Islanders to seek help, according to Randi Shubin Dresner, the president and chief executive of Melville-based Island Harvest, the region's other food bank.

"What we hear from families that we are supporting is that the price of all their expenses — whether it be the supermarket, gas tank — their income hasn't changed, so there's not as much to cover their food budget," Dresner said. "What we know from history is people tend to give up meals before they give up paying rent, gassing their car for work or paying insurance. Then they turn to the food bank or other community-based organizations."

Record food distribution

Before the pandemic, in 2019, Island Harvest distributed 9.7



Army veteran Cyrus Council, of president.

"We're definitely seeing an increase in people coming," Colletti said.

The soup kitchen, which rents space at Trinity Lutheran Church in Wyandanch, is open Monday through Friday. It offers people the option of eating on the premises or taking meals to go. But they have cut back slightly on how many to-go meals they allow, from four to three.

"This is because of the influx of people," Colletti said.

Colletti provided a chart showing that 27,721 people were served by the kitchen in 2023, compared with 23,734 people in 2022, an increase of nearly 17%. The number of people served in 2023 also was higher than the total in 2019 — 23,879. During the pandemic in 2020, which prompted a nationwide shutdown of business, the soup kitchen closed for three months.

In Riverhead, the number of households being served "on a

WHAT TO KNOW

■ **Food banks, food pantries** and soup kitchens on Long Island all report an increasing need for emergency food assistance.

■ **Long Island Cares — The Harry Chapin Regional Food Bank** said its food distribution increased from year-to-year in 2022 and 2023 and is on pace to increase again this year.

■ **Long Island Cares has come out** against a proposed federal farm bill it said could jeopardize the ability of the USDA to swiftly send food to communities like Long Island.

million pounds of food to its network of 300 community-based nonprofit organizations, said Greg May, the nonprofit's director of government and community relations.

From July 1, 2023, to this past June 30, May said, Island Harvest "distributed a record amount of food — 18.7 million pounds."

At Mercy Soup Kitchen of Wyandanch Inc., they also have noticed the rising demand, said Vito Colletti, the nonprofit's

cuts in USDA help



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

Freeport, shops for staples at Long Island Cares' pantry: "I have a good experience every time I come."

busy day" at Open Arms Care Center Emergency Food Pantry has gone from about 15 in April 2020 to roughly 200-plus this past April, executive director Zona Stroy said.

The pantry operates two days a week out of First Baptist Church on Northville Turnpike. Since the start of the pandemic, Stroy said, the pantry has switched from having people come inside to drive-up food distribution.

"We don't have 200 cars drive through," Stroy said. "We probably have 100 or so because people have gotten used to coming with their neighbor so they get through the line faster."

Still, she said, the line of cars "goes down Northville Turnpike."

Farm bill opposition

At the Wednesday news conference, Long Island Cares officials, joined by community-based nonprofit leader Cathy Demeroto, executive director

of CAST in Southold; Ryan Healy, advocacy manager of Feeding New York State, which supports the 10 regional food banks across the state; and Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-Glen Cove), pressed ahead against a proposed farm bill being debated in Congress they said could jeopardize the ability of the USDA to swiftly send food to communities like Long Island.

The proposal under consideration, Haynes told *Newsday*, "restricts [the] USDA's ability to make these purchases on its own. It's proposed that they would have to get congressional approval. We don't support that provision. The program is working. . . . We want Congress to let [the] USDA do their job with the money they entrust to them."

Without the USDA's funding "we will not keep pace" with the increased need, he added. "There will be more hungry Long Islanders."

In an open letter dated May

10, Rep. Glenn Thompson (R-Pa.), chair of the House Agriculture Committee, said of the proposed legislation in part: "The 2024 Farm Bill was written for these precarious times and is reflective of the diverse constituency and narrow margins of the 118th Congress. Each title takes into consideration the varying opinions of all who produce as much as those who consume. It is not one-sided, it does not favor a fringe agenda, and it certainly does no harm to the programs and policies that feed, fuel, and clothe our nation."

"There exists a few, loud armchair critics that want to divide the Committee and break the process. A farm bill has long been an example of consensus, where both sides must take a step off the soapbox and have tough conversations."

Suggested solution

Long Island Cares' president and chief executive, Paule Pachter, told *Newsday* that

"Congress doesn't understand, in my opinion, where the food is going and who the food is feeding. And to put restrictions on the farm bill that would have them do fiscal oversight of the USDA budget in this area, it just doesn't make sense. It's going to slow things up. We're going to wind up with more gridlock in supply chains."

One answer to lessening the need for emergency food, Pachter said, would be for Congress to "regionalize the federal poverty level."

Currently, the official federal poverty level for a family of four is \$31,200 for anywhere across the 48 contiguous states. In a high-cost area like Long Island, some people earning much higher wages still struggle.

A 2022 report by the Suffolk County Legislature's Welfare to Work Commission determined that the true definition of poverty on Long Island, based on the cost of housing, food, transportation and basic necessities, should be \$55,000 for a family of four. The official federal poverty level determines who is eligible for government benefits.

'If it ain't broke . . .'

Long Island Cares officials said they invited other members of Long Island's congressional delegation to the news conference.

Rep. Andrew Garbarino (R-Bayport) didn't attend but sent a member of his staff. Pachter said food bank officials had met and shared their concerns with other members of Long Island's congressional delegation in Washington, D.C.

"The idea of having an additional layer of congressional approval on top of the farm bill itself doesn't make any sense. It just delays the process," Suozzi told *Newsday*. ". . . If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

As to the status of the farm bill, Suozzi said: "Everything's behind because people aren't working together. . . . What people are hoping for when people go back [to Congress] in September is we can get an extension of the existing, the old farm bill for a few months or a year even, so we can work out some of the controversies we're having."

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THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1867 President Andrew Johnson sparked a move to impeach him as he defied Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. (Johnson was acquitted by the Senate.)

1898 Fighting in the Spanish-American War ended.

1953 The Soviet Union conducted a secret test of its first hydrogen bomb.

1960 The first balloon communications satellite — the Echo 1 — was launched by the United States from Cape Canaveral.

1981 IBM introduced its first personal computer, the model 5150.

2017 A driver plowed into a crowd of people peacefully protesting a white nationalist rally in the Virginia college town of Charlottesville, killing Heather Heyer and injuring more than a dozen others. (The attacker, James Alex Fields, was sentenced to life in prison on 29 federal hate crime charges, and life plus 419 years on state charges.)

**LI People
ON THE MOVE**

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EAST ISLIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

Christian Seifert, of Melville, has been appointed director of world languages, ENL (English as a new language) and assessments in the **East Islip School District**. Seifert was world languages coordinator for the district and assistant principal at the East Islip Middle School in Islip Terrace.



MICHAEL MANNELLA

Reyna Felix, of Baldwin, a program associate at **Long Island Cares' Nassau Center for Collaborative Assistance** in Freeport, has been promoted to program coordinator.



NELSON + POPE

Keith J. Gurnick, of Sayville, director of architecture and construction administration at **Nelson + Pope** in Melville, has been promoted to senior associate.



EAST ISLIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

Korin Scarles, of Seaford, has been appointed director of humanities in the **East Islip school district**. Scarles was assistant principal at East Islip High School in Islip Terrace.



SCHNEIDER GARRASTEGUI & FEDELE

Vivian Garrastegui, of Ronkonkoma, a partner at **Schneider Garrastegui & Fedele** in Melville, has been appointed to the board of advisers for **New York Community Trust — Long Island** in Commack.



FARRELL FRITZ

Brian P. Corrigan, of Garden City, a partner at **Farrell Fritz** in Uniondale, has been appointed to the board of advisers for **New York Community Trust — Long Island** in Commack.

— DIANE DANIELS

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LI BUSINESS

GETTY IMAGES / PHYNART STUDIO

To help save on back-to-school shopping, separate needed items from wants to prioritize on the essentials.

THE ISSUE: BUDGETING

Moms share savings tips for back-to-school lists

MONEY FIX

NerdWallet

According to NerdWallet's 2024 back-to-school shopping report, those who are parents of K-12 or college students and who plan to do back-to-school shopping this year will spend \$541, on average, on school supplies and clothing for their kids' upcoming school year.

Three moms with children of various ages share tips on how to shop for clothes and supplies on a budget. Even if you've already gotten a head start on shopping, these gems may still come in handy for next year.

Separate needs from wants

Back-to-school supply lists can seem endless. When you do finally get to the end of the list, you may find that you've broken your budget. Kimyatta Williams, a day care owner from Atlanta, has a vibrant family with six children and has mastered staying within her budget by separating needs from wants. Williams' oldest child is 23 and her youngest is 9, so she's well-versed in back-to-school shopping.

"I can't afford to get all these things on the list. So I'm making the priority to prioritize the needs from wants," Williams says.

"So crayons versus markers. I'm not gonna buy both. They both do the same thing. So I may purchase the markers versus the crayons or I may purchase the big pack of 64 crayons versus the markers, especially at a grade level of a first-grader or a second-grader," she adds.

Additionally, Williams attends back-to-school events, which usually give out free supplies. You can search for these events on Google, Eventbrite, Facebook or your local government's website.

Consider sustainable clothing

Clothing can be a major expense for parents when their kids are going back to school. Gyna Uhrlass, an entrepreneur and content creator in Manhattan, is a mother of three who focuses on using sustainable clothing options to help budget for clothing expenses.

She says one of the most frustrating things about back-to-school shopping for her is how expensive everything is, especially because of inflation. She finds that clothes and shoes are her biggest expense.

One way Uhrlass keeps expenses low is by using hand-me-downs or pre-owned clothes. "My family is Caribbean. When I was growing up, we never did any hand-me-downs. Now that I'm older, I am all about hand-me-downs," she says.

Uhrlass regularly gets used clothes from her friend who has a son a year older than hers.

"I have not had to buy a significant amount of clothes for him in years," she says.

Set a budget and negotiate

Samantha Danielle Sharpe, a content creator and mother of three located in Nashville, Tennessee, has a home full of teenagers, ages 14, 16 and 18. Since her kids are older, she approaches back-to-school shopping by setting a budget and negotiating with them. However, that's sometimes hard to do because of social media's influence.

"I think there's just a lot of pressure to get your kids so many different trendy items," she says, adding that her daughter requested all pink supplies.

Sharpe tackles this issue by setting a budget for each of her children so they can learn to manage money and prioritize.

"As a single mom, I'm really honest with my kids. For me, it's not just about the resources that I have. It's about me wanting to make sure that I set my kids up for realistic expectations in life," she says.

Other strategies Sharpe uses include following moms who share saving tips on social media and tapping into her community. Her family has a group chat where they post any items they aren't using and share sales they come across.

Sharpe also makes the most of her credit cards that give cash back rewards.