Facing food insecurity

Finding kosher, halal meals can be hard for some

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From a food truck parked outside the Islamic Center of Long Island, Ahmad Sheikh leans over to speak with a customer: “How many, brother?”

“Three,” responds a man waiting outside on a recent weekend.

Sheikh and about five others inside the food truck then grab three pre-assembled meals of rice and butter chicken, along with salad, and give them to the man. No money is exchanged, and not many questions are asked of the man or the others who drive and walk up to the Westbury mosque to get the free meals prepared according to Islamic dietary codes.

Throughout Long Island, familiar scenes play out as Jewish and Muslim communities provide provisions to the food-insecure who are sometimes faced with a difficult decision: neglect their religious dietary laws or observe them and go hungry.

“Those individuals have to either compromise their dignity and have it or not have it, and that is a humanity issue,” said Dr. Isma Chaudhry, of the Islamic Center of Long Island.

As with the greater Long Island population, food insecurity within the two faith communities has become more pressing as the long-term high cost of living melts with a high inflationary climate and the reduction of some government food benefits that helped offset hunger in the earlier days of the pandemic.

But unlike some other communities, getting food assistance for kosher or halal-observant members can be a minefield of finding the right products and hoping they are labeled correctly.

A recent report from Long Island Cares, the regional food bank that has purchasing power to buy food items in bulk, highlights the barriers to getting food to the two communities, from the cost of buying culturally specific food, to the lack of knowledge of the need, to a sense of shame in needing to ask. The group recently received a $160,000 grant to combat food insecurity in communities with dietary restrictions.

WHAT TO KNOW

- Getting food assistance for kosher or halal-observant people can be a minefield of finding the right products and hoping they are labeled correctly, as well as confronting higher costs.
- A recent report from Long Island Cares food bank also highlighted obstacles, such as the lack of knowledge of the need, to a sense of shame in needing to ask.
- Structural fixes are needed, including instituting more inclusive funding and government food programs, according to experts.

Volunteers work in the food truck where they serve meals at the Islamic Center of Long Island.

Islamic Center volunteer Ahmad Sheikh hands a halal meal to schoolteacher Komal Qureshi in Westbury. video.newsday.tv

A learning curve

The findings from the report offer a window into food insecurity on the island. Although roughly 200,000 people of the Jewish faith live in Nassau and Suffolk counties, the report said there are just four kosher pantries. Between January and October 2022, the two kosher pantries run by Long Island Cares served 16,270 households, or about 54,000 people. They provided 482,544 meals. Kosher laws restrict items such as pork and determine how other food can be prepared. Those who strictly observe the laws seek certification from a rabbinical organization to ensure the food preparation has followed the proper guidelines.

Within the Jewish community, participants in the survey that Long Island Cares included with the report expressed concern about being able to access kosher meals because of their high prices. Others talked about the shame of needing help or being turned away from the Supplementary Nutritional Assistant Program, formerly known as food stamps, because their income was too high.

According to the report, finding halal-certified products in Long Island’s Muslim community proved to be particularly challenging. Affordable halal food remains difficult to find in pantries, and it tends to cost more.
in the observant

For example, Long Island Cares, in its bulk purchases, pays $66.11 per 12 single-pound cases for halal ground beef and $39.88 for that quantity of kosher ground beef. Meanwhile, the price of beef of the same quantity that does not have those certifications is sold for $50.36.

In Islam, halal refers to what is permissible, including foods that can be eaten. Haram refers to what is not permitted. When it comes to food and drink, it includes items that use alcohol and pork, as well as their derivatives. That can mean foods such as many types of non-mahshi pies or gummy bears shouldn’t be consumed, faith leaders say.

Within the Long Island Cares pantry network, people had experienced a sporadic availability of halal meats. And during the pandemic, there has been an increase in requests for halal products. Mosques, on their own, were filling the gaps, the report found.

Jennifer Rosati, vice president of programs for Long Island Cares, said it has been a learning curve to meet these two communities’ needs. Before undertaking the report, Rosati said, the organization generally didn’t purchase halal foods.

Now, she said, it does and has added two mosques to its food network, including the Islamic Center of Long Island. In the Jewish community, she envisions buying more kosher meat and meeting other dietary preferences.

But for Rosati, who has a doctorate in social and community services, providing more religiously aligned food underscores the fact that pantry and other services are becoming supplemental to users’ regular diets and no longer are strictly an emergency measure. Long Island has roughly 200,000 food-insecure people, according to research from the nonprofit Feeding America.

“People are coming to the food pantries to supplement their food needs consistently because the money that they do have earmarked for food is not going as far as it once did,” she said. “So what we see on Long Island more so are folks that are working poor.”

Haylee Hebenstreit, professor at the Stony Brook University School of Social Welfare, said food pantries, soup kitchens and other types of emergency feeding methods serve as a Band-Aid but don’t address the root causes of hunger.

“They’re one of the ways that in the absence of policy solutions and in the absence of a concerted social safety net programs, that we have to get people something to eat,” she said.

The structural fixes could involve instituting more inclusive funding and government food programs, according to experts.

28,000 received benefits

Last year, Nassau County had roughly 28,000 households receive food benefits. Newsday has reported. Suffolk, according to that report, saw more than 66,000 households get those benefits in the same year.

But many are denied the benefits because they make too much money, experts say. And the allotment of SNAP benefits has been rolled back to pre-pandemic levels. A family of four, with no person with disabilities and an earned income of $43,628 or less, may be eligible for the benefits, according to the SNAP standard that went into effect in October.

“We have to shift this idea of charitable food provision as the appropriate response to food insecurity to one that is a more rights-based conception that more fully respects people’s dignity and autonomy in their food choices,” Hebenstreit said.

Dignity is critical in serving many people within the Jewish community, said Dona Schawb, who works as a supervisor of the food pantry and holds several other positions at the nonprofit Hatzlu Rescue Organization, which has received a grant from Long Island Cares.

Hatzlu discreetly delivers food such as turkey, chicken and prepared food to homes every two weeks to a month. It also feeds people who need food from other faiths.

Schawb said delivery allows people who are hesitant to go to a rabbi or to be public about their need to get the food they require.

Communities such as Great Neck and the Five Towns make up much of their service area. The clientele includes older people who have outrivaled their benefits, young families with many children and those who make too much to apply for SNAP benefits.

“Those are families that were used to buying whatever they wanted,” Schawb said. “And they’re the families that are most embarrassed by asking for food because they are in areas that are affluent.”

Still, she insists the people they serve aren’t spending frivolously, noting: “They’re paying rent and barely living.”

“The need for money for food,” she said, “is real.”

For Ramadan, which begins on Wednesday and ends on April 21, during which observers fast from sunup to sundown, the Westbury mosque plans to serve more than 500 meals in the morning and around the same number to break the fast in the evening.

Back at the hunger truck, owned by a group called the Halal Guide and 12 other organizations and operated on a time-shares, Sheikh recalls running out of meals in 30 minutes on Long Island. That rate, he said, is similar to what he saw when he went to Pakistan for flood relief efforts.

“People live on Long Island, so you think everyone’s doing well,” he said. “But that’s not necessarily the case.”

The line was slower on that Saturday, but it still served its purpose. Lamar Edwards was one of the people who trickled up to the bright red hunger truck outside the place of worship.

Edwards, of Westbury, said the pandemic has made it more challenging to provide for his family and adhere to halal guidelines. He finds himself picking through other types of food pantries but not finding everything he needs.

“It’s better for us to have the food that we eat,” said Edwards, holding a bag of food from the hunger truck. “That’s the route for us.”