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North Jersey food pantries try to meet growing need with fewer resources after fed cuts

Almost a million people in New Jersey don't have regular access to food. After federal cuts to assistance programs, local food pantries are looking for ways to close the gap.

 **Matt Cortina**
NorthJersey.com

Published 4:24 a.m. ET April 4, 2025





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Farmers feeling the effects of government aid freeze while food could go to waste
Farmers, who already operate under thin margins, said funding cuts to programs like USAID, USDA and a new trade war were concerning.

Key Points

- The USDA ended popular programs that sourced food from local farms to supply schools and food pantries.
- A significant reduction in meals sent by the USDA has left some local pantries without enough meat and dairy for their patrons.
- Food pantries in North Jersey are giving away less food even as the number of people who are food insecure continues to climb.

Hundreds of food-insecure families in North Jersey will get — free of charge — farm-fresh produce, eggs, bread and dairy from local farmers this year thanks to a program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



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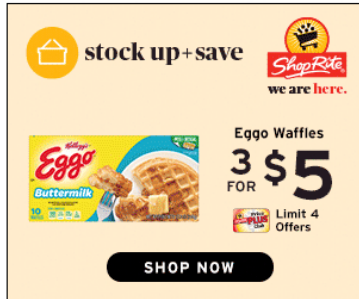
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But that will be the last time.

The USDA, as part of President Donald Trump's push to cut government spending to extend the [2017 tax cuts that benefit the wealthy more than the middle and lower class](#), announced in March that it would [cut funding for its Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement](#). The LFPA and a similar [program](#) work to bring fresh food from local farmers to those in need and into schools.

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By all counts, the LFPA is a success story for [MEND](#), a nonprofit in Orange that stocks 20 food pantries in Essex County, and the [Community FoodBank of New Jersey](#), which oversees the program. It's a unique way to support local farmers and give those in need access to much-needed healthy food.

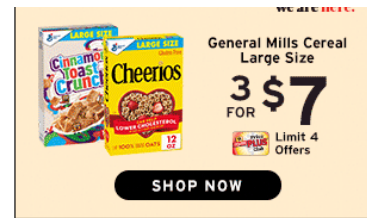


Volunteers get ready for clients at the Dumont Food Brigade on Wednesday, September 13, 2023. The Food Brigade has three pantry locations that offer fresh produce, meats, shelf-stable food and personal care items to those experiencing food insecurity. *Anne-Marie Caruso/NorthJersey.com*

“It’s a fantastic program, which is why it’s so upsetting. It was really working,” said Robin Peacock, executive director of MEND. “We had built relationships with local farmers. For a population that was in need of this kind of support, it was a beautiful marrying of two things. It’s super unfortunate that this is on the chopping block.”

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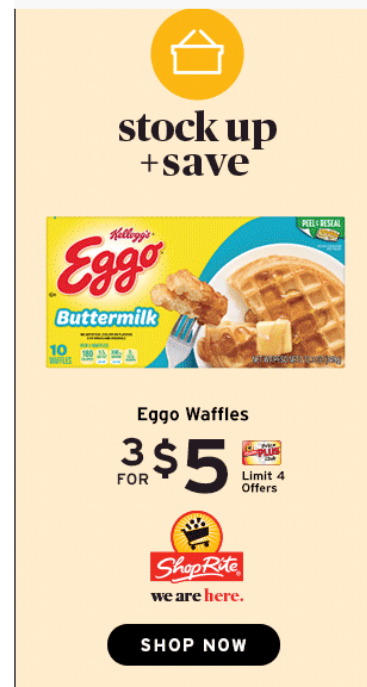
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Almost 1 million people in New Jersey lack regular access to enough food; programs like LFPA, the school program and the Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, [which provides food directly to pantries and which lost half of its funding due to Trump administration cuts](#), are critical resources for food pantries and nonprofits to help meet the need.

So, with more people in need of food and less of that food to go around, what happens?

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“It leaves you with a couple of scenarios,” said Nicole Davis, executive director of the [Center for Food Action](#), which feeds 4,000 families a month in North Jersey. “You may have to reduce the food that you give to the families that come. You will have to inevitably raise more funds, because at some point you will have to purchase other food to fill the gap.”

That’s a tricky spot for food pantries that are already stretched thin. And while the conversation can quickly turn political or get bogged down in statistics, at the end of the day, food pantry operators are seeing the human toll the uncertainty around food sources is taking on patrons and their staff.

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“Seeing people struggling is really difficult,” said Karen DeMarco, founder

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of [The Food Brigade](#), which runs three pantries in North Jersey. “I had a woman who just registered today, and I said to her, ‘OK, do you want to go shopping?’ and she started crying.

“It tears your heart out,” DeMarco continues. “You have people show up and they have a baby in their arms. Sometimes you can see people haven’t been eating. It’s heartbreaking. It’s devastating to me, because I believe in being a good human and I believe the right to feed your family is a right. I don’t think it’s a privilege.”

What federal food assistance did the Trump administration cut?

Last month, the USDA announced that it was cutting more than \$1 billion in funding for the LFPA and Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement programs for 2025. The money was designed to pay farmers to provide food to schools and food banks, giving a boost to local producers while giving fresh options to children and communities.

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Not only did the programs support food banks and schools, but they were valuable resources for farmers, many of whom run small operations and shifted their business models to maximize that program.

“I’ve been farming one day a week, very part-time, and I was able to sell 95% of my product to [Fisherman’s Mark](#),” which runs a food pantry in Lambertville, Devin Cornia, a farmer and head of the [Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey](#), said last year. “It made my year. We need more of that. We need dedicated dollars for a dedicated market, whether it’s going to a food bank, a pantry, or a school.”

“The program has been a win-win,” said Elizabeth McCarthy, president of the Community FoodBank of New Jersey, which provides food to more than 800 pantries across the state. “A lot of these farmers are first-time farm owners or socially disadvantaged, [which] really means people for whom this was a great lifeline to get going and to have this predictable income.”

The USDA [told USA TODAY](#) that the LFPA cuts were a “return to long-term, fiscally responsible initiatives.”

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Food banks also took a hit when it was announced that food deliveries through the USDA's [TEFAP](#) program were being scaled back. McCarthy said it's tricky to figure just exactly how many fewer meals her organization will get from the federal government this year through the program, but she said it looks to be a 10 million-pound reduction, from 25 million pounds last year.

Congress is also considering a budget that reduces [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, payments](#) by \$230 billion over 10 years. More than 800,000 people in New Jersey rely on SNAP for regular access to food.

McCarthy said if SNAP eligibility requirements are elevated (one way to cut funding would be, say, to take a family's eligible income from \$57,000 a year down to \$40,000 a year, a proposal McCarthy said she's heard), then many more folks could be at risk of food insecurity.

"If SNAP is cut, we certainly expect the demand to go up," she said. "That's a lot of people, probably close to a quarter of a million people [in New Jersey], and we expect many of them would have to come to pantries."

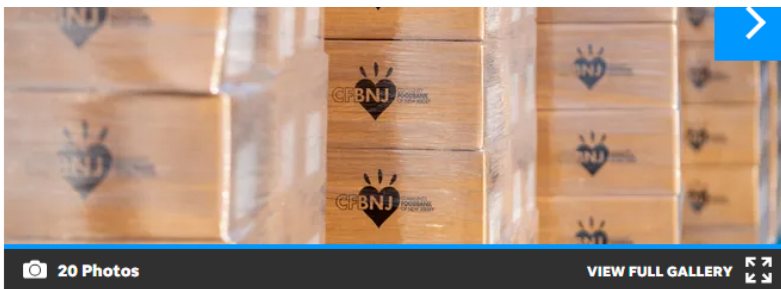
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Ultimately, McCarthy said, the loss of LFPA, the reduction of TEFAP and the potential for SNAP cuts represents "a perfect storm" with which the FoodBank and other pantries are now coping.

Please continue reading this story below the photo gallery.





Thanksgiving food distribution gives 90,000 pounds of produce away: Photos

Through the Bergen County Office of Food Security and New Jersey Community FoodBank, 90,000 pounds of produce were distributed on Monday, Nov. 18, 2024.

How federal cuts are affecting NJ food pantries and nonprofits

At The Food Brigade free community markets in Dumont, Clifton and Union City, DeMarco said, the USDA is the primary source for meat and dairy; since the reductions in service, they're receiving (and thus distributing) one-third less meat and 75% less dairy.

"Eggs and cheese are virtually nonexistent," she said, "which is horrible because they are staples in our diets."

To compensate for the reduction in foods, DeMarco said, she and her team are distributing what they do have equitably based on family size; still, there's less food to go around.

"I used to be able to give people 5 pounds of meat; now I can give most families 2-3 pounds, some 1 pound," she said.

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For prepared goods, DeMarco said, the organization is shifting its focus toward food rescue operations. But there's only so much food to be rescued, so DeMarco said she's distributing food that's past its "best-by" date but is still safe to eat.

"I'm giving them a yogurt that was donated with a best-by date two days ago," she said. "I have to explain to them and teach them that the food we're giving is still healthy and edible and fine but we have to rely more on rescued food."

The strain on food pantries is felt by organizations throughout the support chain, like [Table to Table](#), a North Jersey nonprofit that delivers rescued food to pantries. Heather Thompson, Table to Table executive director, said she has heard from pantries about the increased need and is working to help make up the gap.

to help make up the gap.

“Some are seeing longer lines for food, so we are endeavoring to increase our amounts; others are shifting times and locations of their food distributions to avoid being targeted based on the makeup of the populations they serve, so we are adjusting our delivery schedules accordingly,” she said. “There is so much uncertainty right now around funding for nonprofits and benefits programs for our neighbors, the best we can do is keep our lines of communication with our partners wide open, listen to what they are experiencing and do our best to respond.”

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"No matter what happens, the need for fresh food is not going away," Thompson said.

Most pantries are volunteer-run, but food coordinators like Table to Table, the Center for Food Action and the CFBNJ are assessing how they can best maximize their workforce to feed people — for the Community FoodBank, that means cutting staff.

"We're trying to ask: Are we the most efficient organization we can be and putting as many resources to food as we can?" McCarthy said. "We've gone through downsizing on our staff and are looking around and asking: Are there good things to do in the long run but right now [we can't]?"

It also means making tough decisions about where to direct food.

"What we've gotten better at is understanding our need in the state, so if we have to scale back, I wouldn't say we're gonna cut 10% across the board, we would look at data and say: Where is the need greatest? Where do we have the fewest pantries?" McCarthy said. "These are hard decisions you don't want to have to make, but this is the position we're in."

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Peacock said MEND's programs are scalable but that it, too, is considering alternatives if things get bad.

"The unfortunate thing is we know our programming is working. So the last resort would be we have to cut home deliveries or we have to pull back on the amount of fresh food we're supporting a pantry with. We don't want to do that," she said. "As long as our supporters are seeing the programming is working and feeling like they're able to keep supporting that work, then we're OK. When we start to have the perfect storm of donors, funders pulling back, then we get into trouble. Not this year, but next year, maybe it's not a growth mindset."

'Pandemic 2.0': An escalating need for food in New Jersey

With fewer resources, the specter of SNAP benefits reduced, the cost of groceries high and economic uncertainty going forward, the need will continue to rise, DeMarco said — The Food Brigade signed up over 30 new families in the last two weeks alone.

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Davis, at the Center for Food Action, said these times are reminiscent of the pandemic. The group's pantries experienced three times as many people — in large part because the need was great. But the demand hasn't really waned since.

"This feels like pandemic 2.0, but the difference was for the pandemic, we had a lot of excess, a lot of donations of food, a lot of donations of funds, a lot of government assistance," Davis said. "So now you have to see how this turns out, but what remains constant are the number of people that are coming. And that number has grown since the pandemic and probably will continue to grow."

DeMarco said the stigma for seeking food assistance lessened during the pandemic — the regularity of seeing large lines outside pantries made some folks more comfortable with seeking help. It's not always that easy, she said.

"Nobody wants to ask for help for food. Nobody wants to be in the position where they have to go to a food pantry and ask for help," she said. "It's the hardest call to make, and unfortunately when they make it, they should have made that call weeks ago."

Food insecurity groups are hopeful the state can help meet part of the gap created by the Trump administration's decisions, but, depending on the outcome of this year's gubernatorial election, state funding of food for those in need might be limited.

McCarthy is hopeful the issue transcends politics: "You would hope food is a fairly bipartisan issue."

Jennifer Williford, executive director of Fisherman's Mark, said the combination of a greater need for food and fewer resources is likely to have an ongoing ripple effect. While bigger pantries like those of Fisherman's Mark may have the benefit of a motivated local community, others do not, and the need will affect them one way or the other.

"Although we have not felt the pain of the cuts yet, we are bracing for what is most likely coming soon," she said. "We feel for the smaller food pantries that are heavily reliant on government support. We certainly know that if smaller pantries don't survive, we will have more pressure on us to provide the necessary support needed."

DeMarco agrees that smaller pantries may end up having to close their doors if they're not able to secure enough food, which in turn will affect the people who rely on them to eat.

"Most of our clients are the working poor. Many of them have multiple jobs at low wages, and it's not enough for them to pay rent, bills, their drug prescriptions, etc., and these parents are left with the choice of feeding their children or keeping their electricity on," she said. "Nonprofits like The Food Brigade are happy to help for our neighbors in need, but we need support, and to suddenly strip away that support would be devastating to local families."

Matt Cortina is a food reporter for NorthJersey.com/The Record. Reach him at atmcortina@gannett.com.



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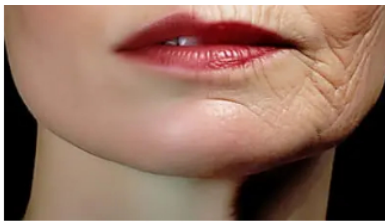
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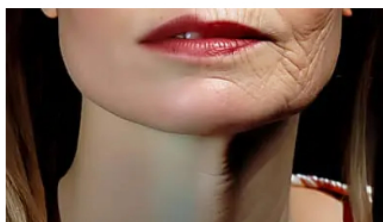
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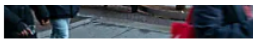
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