

## Local volunteer organizations work to ease food insecurity

By RSVP

May 17, 2023

<https://www.readingeagle.com/2023/05/17/local-volunteer-organizations-work-to-ease-food-insecurity/>



Volunteers prepare for food distribution at the onset of the pandemic. (Courtesy of RSVP)

Do you know when your next meal will be? Over 34 million Americans face hunger every day and are never sure when they will have their next meal. In the Philadelphia area, it's estimated that 1 in 10 households are struggling with food insecurity.

Several local food cupboards, distribution sites and meal delivery organizations work tirelessly every day to help ease the insecurity and hunger experienced by so many in our area.

Food insecurity affects various populations, including children, seniors, the homebound and disabled; individuals experiencing homelessness; and communities with limited access to affordable and nutritious food options.

Food insecurity has several detrimental and lasting impacts. The lack of nutritious food can result in an increased risk of both chronic diseases and mental health issues. Children may face difficulties in concentrating and performing well in school, resulting in lower academic achievement and increased absenteeism.

Food insecurity can perpetuate the cycle of economic instability, forcing families to make tough choices between buying food or meeting other basic needs such as paying rent, healthcare costs or utility bills.

RSVP Volunteers has partnered with several organizations by providing screened and dedicated volunteers to help meet this ongoing and growing need.

Caring for Friends in Philadelphia has been providing meals and friendship to homebound seniors, the disabled and veterans for 50 years.

“It all began with our founder Rita Schiavone, learning that her neighbor had no food anywhere in the house,” said Matthew Gambino, managing director for programs. “We are now the largest food bank in Philadelphia and work with 500 community agencies to pick up food and deliver to partner agencies who distribute to their community members.

“In 2002, we served 300,000 people. Our volunteers prepare meals in their own kitchens or in church kitchens, we freeze them and bring them to our partner agencies. Volunteers make around 7,000 sandwiches and snack bags each month for the homeless population.”

During the pandemic, Caring for Friends received food from government agencies and now relies on donations from long-term relationships with wholesalers and retailers and the efforts of volunteers to prepare and deliver meals and food to community partners.

“Many of our clients are homebound and have medical issues,” Gambino said. “They simply cannot get to the store, or they are struggling economically and are not able to shop themselves. Our services are completely free, and we strive to deliver food, and a few moments of friendship in the hope that we can stabilize their situation.”

To learn more, visit [caringforfriends.org](http://caringforfriends.org).



RSVP volunteer Larry Gregan is ready to help at Martha's Choice. (Courtesy of RSVP)

When COVID-19 struck, newly retired Larry Gregan knew he had to do something to help. He started with RSVP Volunteers at one of their food distribution events and became aware of the great need community members had for food security.

After the distribution events, Gregan joined Martha's Choice Marketplace food pantry in Norristown and was assigned to sorting and bagging produce for community distribution.

“I volunteer with a team of between two to eight people, two days each week, and we sort and bag veggies and fruit,” he said. “We have become friends and rely on each other. It's very gratifying to place the bags into the cars of guests and see how grateful and appreciative they are, I especially like interacting with the children.”

Martha's Choice may have anywhere between 100-200 families coming through during the distribution days on Wednesday and Friday.

"The guest will register on site to report any dietary restrictions, or special needs like diapers or depends," Gregan said. "We have people picking up for neighbors, families living in their cars, or even mothers coming through with strollers to pick up food. The size of the family determines how many bags of food they will receive."

Hannah Leifheit, Martha's Choice Food Pantry manager for community engagement, said the goal is to build community with volunteers and guests.

"We try to provide a place where people feel welcome, heard and cared for in a humane way," she said. "Before the pandemic, Martha's Choice was a choice model where people shopped with carts, and guests and volunteers shared recipes. It was very close knit. The pandemic caused us to move to a drive through model and now we meet people as they drive or walk through to connect."

Martha's Choice Marketplace is seeing a growth in food security issues in the community it serves. During 2022, 3,300 families were served, reaching 13,600 people. In the first three months of 2023, they have already served 2,200 families, totaling about 9,500 people.

"We try to provide a well-rounded variety of foods that include basic staples, canned veggies, butter and milk, and frozen meats while ensuring that selections are culturally appropriate," Leifheit said. "We also include some bread and bakery items and toiletries. If we can help a family by providing enough food for an entire week, perhaps the family can take care of pressing bills such as rent or utilities."

Martha's Choice collects food from distributors, Philabundance, grocery stores or local church collections, boy scout or book drive collections.

"We always appreciate when people ask, 'What do you need?'" Leifheit said. "Those donations help fill in the blanks. We think that food is a human right, and we work hard to help where we can."

To learn more, visit [marthaschoicemarketplace.com](https://marthaschoicemarketplace.com).

To learn more about volunteering to address hunger and food security, please contact [volunteer123@rsvpmc.org](mailto:volunteer123@rsvpmc.org) or 610-834-1040, extension 123.

Nonprofit RSVP's programs improve the lives of vulnerable populations by focusing on education and wellness. For information on volunteering, visit [rsvpmc.org](https://rsvpmc.org), email [volunteer123@rsvpmc.org](mailto:volunteer123@rsvpmc.org); or call 610-834-1040, ext. 123.