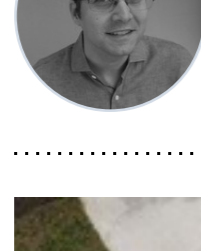


IDEAS

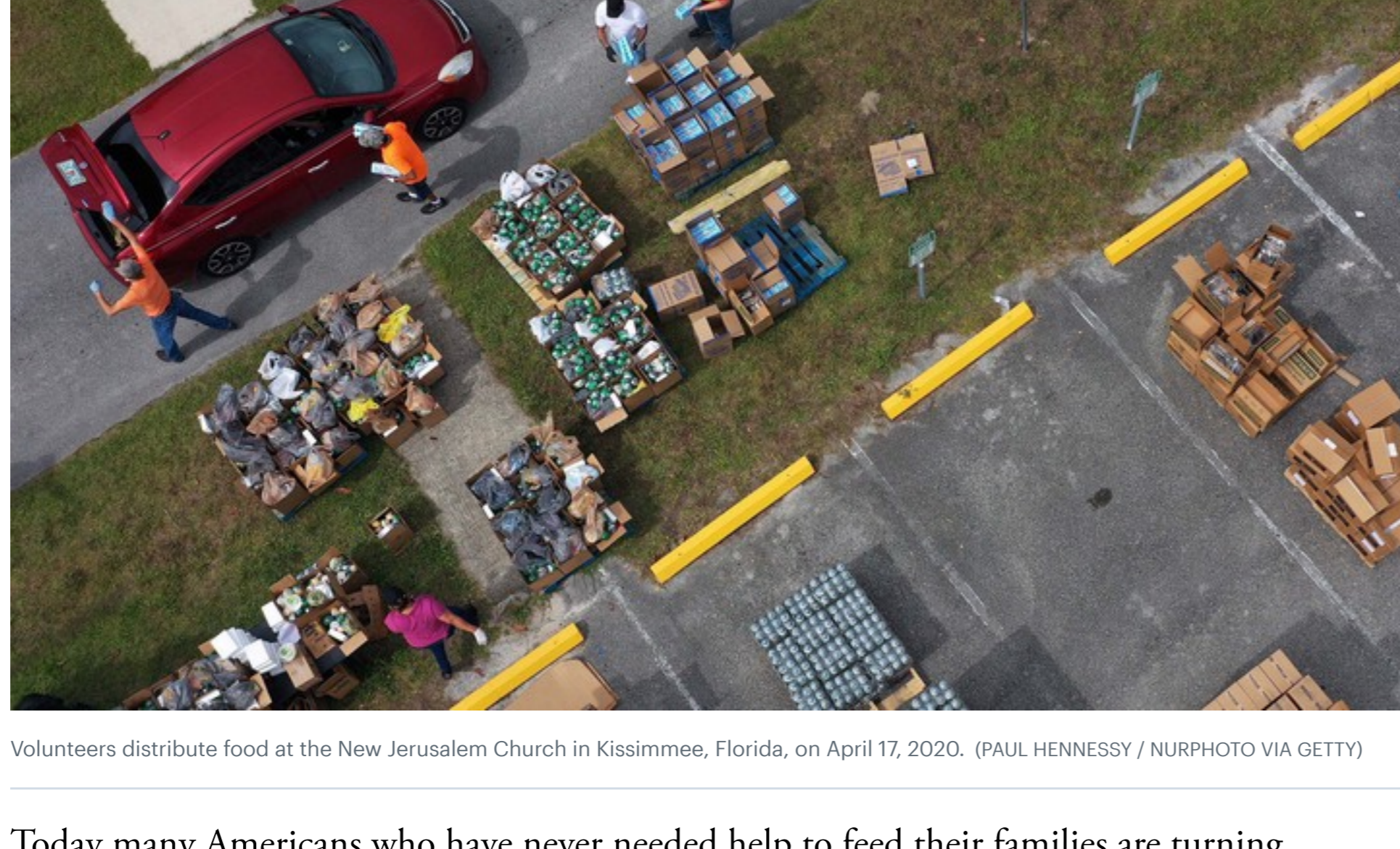
Food Banks Can't Go On Like This

Demand is spiking. And meeting it is costlier than ever. Without more changes to federal and state food assistance, the status quo is unsustainable.

MAY 6, 2020



Conor Friedersdorf
Staff writer at *The Atlantic*



Volunteers distribute food at the New Jerusalem Church in Kissimmee, Florida, on April 17, 2020. (PAUL HENNESSY / NURPHOTO VIA GETTY)

Today many Americans who have never needed help to feed their families are turning to charity as they struggle with the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

To better understand this crisis, I contacted a dozen different hunger-relief organizations that are scrambling to meet the sudden increase in demand. The level of need and vulnerability that their staffers described was alarming. These organizations' resourcefulness under current circumstances is impressive. If nothing changes, though, they'll run out of food and money. Government officials could help tremendously by making it easier for people to qualify for food stamps, even beyond [recent emergency reforms](#), but public-assistance programs are often designed to limit enrollment rather than to guarantee nutrition to everyone thrown out of work during a global pandemic.

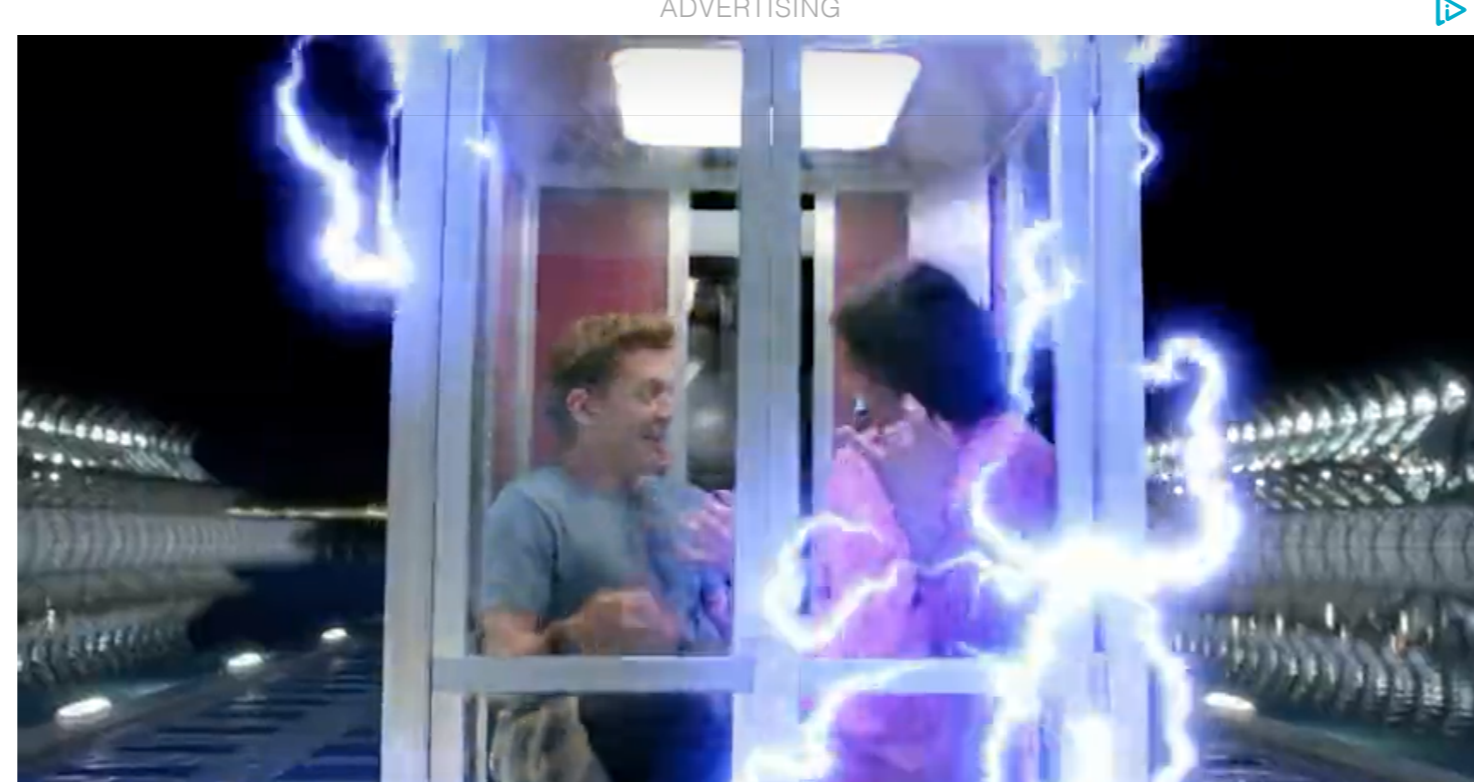
Sign up for The Atlantic's daily newsletter.

Each weekday evening, get an overview of the day's biggest news, along with fascinating ideas, images, and voices.

[Read: Who will run the soup kitchens?]

In San Diego County, the fifth most populous in the country, the nonprofit Feeding San Diego reports that demand at its 300 distribution sites is up at least 40 to 50 percent. "People who four weeks ago were living middle-class lives now find themselves in debt, without cash, unable to pay for their most essential needs," Vince Hall, the group's CEO, told me. The organization's online "food finder" tool experienced such a big surge in traffic that its web-hosting provider levied a bandwidth penalty.

ADVERTISEMENT



Ads by Search

Meeting San Diego's rise in demand has required adaptability. Normally, "rescued" food—items that would otherwise be thrown out as their sell-by date approaches—accounts for 97 percent of Feeding San Diego's distributions. Until the pandemic, the group was receiving unpurchased food from 204 Starbucks locations every night of the year. Most of those stores are now closed. The organization normally gets excess food from 260 grocery stores too, but consumers have been stocking up enough lately that many shelves are picked clean.



Volunteers directing cars to receive food from a distribution site in Los Angeles. Patrick T. Fallon / Reuters

In the first weeks of this crisis, the lack of food from these sources was offset by restaurants, hotels, and catering firms that donated their inventories as the shutdown began. But that was a onetime windfall—and some of it was food packaged in industrial sizes that work well in large commercial kitchens but poorly for parceling out to families. To compensate for the dearth of rescued food, Feeding San Diego is

now purchasing wholesale in the same system where grocery stores themselves are accelerating orders. Food banks are also having to pay premium prices. The day we spoke, Hall authorized a \$97,000 purchase of chicken and pork.

Facing Hunger Foodbank in West Virginia used to serve about 129,000 people on a typical day. Its executive director, Cynthia D. Kirkhart, witnessed the same sharp rise in demand after her state issued its stay-at-home order. Then the retail donations that the food bank receives from partners such as Walmart and Kroger shrank by roughly 90 percent, and delivery times for purchased food grew from a week to eight or 10 weeks. "Between March 30 and April 8, I placed orders in excess of \$487,000 for food, and some of it won't be arriving until late June, but at least I'll have a regular influx coming in," she told me. "My total budget for this year was about \$500,000. My reworked budget is going to look more like \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million, and that's with an optimistic outlook for what happens with this pandemic and how long we are in recovery."

Kirkhart could swing that purchase because of reserves built up through frugality and fundraising. Big Sandy Superstore, a furniture retailer, has urged its customers to donate \$50 to Facing Hunger to feed a family for a week. On Easter, the Dutch Miller Auto Group sponsored three church services on a local TV station and ran ads during breaks urging food-bank donations. "In an hour, there were 53 new donors," she said. When food is donated directly, the logistics of sorting and distributing it are not simple, and Kirkhart's group encourages people to give money when possible. The food bank can give out 7.5 meals per dollar, she said. "I can make \$50 become magical with economies of scale."

In Ventura County, California, the organization Food Share had been distributing 1 million pounds of food each month before the pandemic. That figure is now doubling. The Air National Guard is helping it to pack up boxes for drive-through pickup events. Its supply took a hit when the availability of food to rescue fell significantly. But California's unusually large local agriculture industry makes securing fresh produce easier than in most American communities. "The abundance of surplus produce we're seeing across the country is particularly concentrated in Ventura County, because we produce enough to feed a global market," Food Share stated in a release. "We are distributing fresh produce with each pop-up distribution but at this time we do not have the resources or facilities to receive and distribute everything that is offered to us."

[Read: Why the coronavirus is so confusing]

Alaska faces different circumstances. Headquartered in Anchorage, the Food Bank of Alaska is dealing with about 75 percent more demand than usual—in a state whose spread-out geography makes collection and distribution a particular challenge. Most food must be imported from elsewhere. And once that feat is accomplished, getting that food out to far-flung rural communities and into the hands of the needy involves a complex distribution channel. "Recently a prominent air carrier, RavenAir, declared bankruptcy and ceased operations." Cara Durr, the organization's director of public engagement, told me. "Other airlines have stepped up to fill some gaps, but there's not a lot of wiggle room in these systems."

Getting food to needy children is harder than before with public schools shut down. The Food Bank of Alaska typically runs a summer program for kids too, but many of the organizations that help it pass food out haven't yet signed on this year due to uncertainty about running a distribution site in a pandemic.

What would make feeding needy Alaskans easier?

When the federal government began giving out unemployment benefits of \$600 a week beyond what states normally offer, many families got a necessary lifeline, but also found themselves exceeding the income eligibility requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the federal program formerly—and still colloquially—known as food stamps. Those people will need to reapply for SNAP when the unemployment benefits run out, Durr said.

Alaska is one of the states that doesn't yet allow residents to sign up for SNAP online. Applications require a paper signature, despite the significant difficulties involved in travel to and from rural communities. A recent waiver will allow the Food Bank of Alaska to use telephonic signatures once a system for them is set up. But administrative burden would be reduced if people kicked off of SNAP because of a brief spike in income didn't need to reapply just weeks later.

[Photos: The volunteers]

The diverging circumstances in different regions underscore the importance of local knowledge in meeting the challenges ahead. But food-bank staffers in every area agreed that getting nutrition to people who need it is complicated by regulations meant to prevent people from abusing SNAP—some of them added as recently as last year. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act [gave states permission](#) to modify some needlessly onerous eligibility restrictions and procedures, but not all states have taken full advantage of that new flexibility, and hunger-relief advocates have called for additional reforms, such as [expanding the ability to order food online](#).

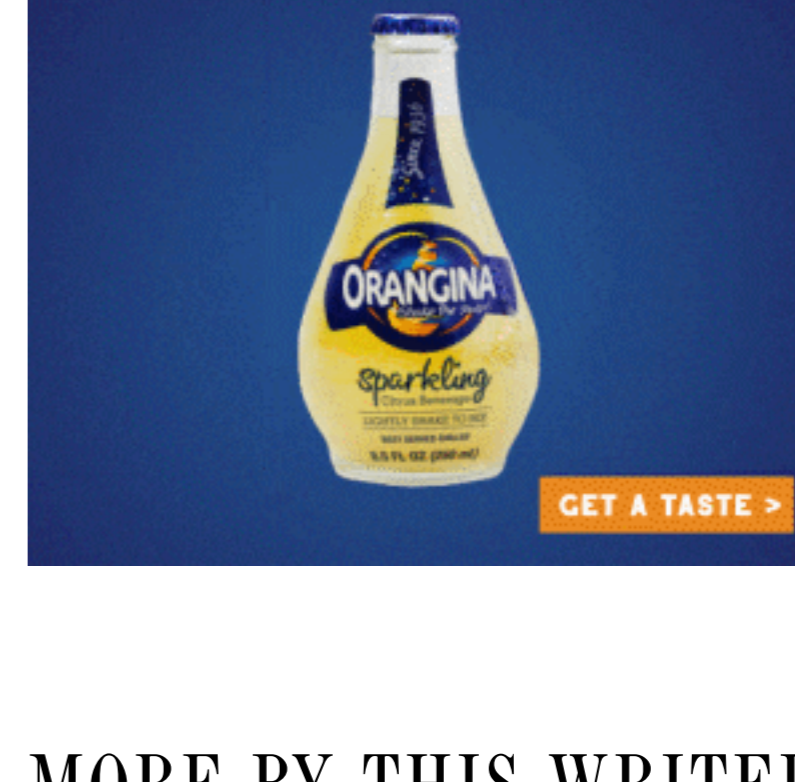
More generous food-stamp benefits would help too. "We must provide more food assistance as more families struggle financially and our food banks strain to help," the Representative Mike Doyle, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, wrote on Twitter, acknowledging that the strain on food banks will be reduced once families can meet more of their food needs using EBT cards to make purchases online and at supermarkets.

Especially in the months ahead, when social distancing will prevent many from returning to work and even mild unrest could prove hugely damaging to the country, the United States would be better off focusing on getting food to people who need it rather than keeping it from those who don't.

"This is a moment of incredible anxiety and fear in our communities, and the health crisis is the primary fear everyone has. But the economic crisis is equally terrifying to people, and they are despondent over the lack of a path forward," Hall, of Feeding San Diego, told me. "They don't understand how long we are going to be in this environment and what it's going to look like to get out of it."

"But when you put a box of food in somebody's hands—let me revise that, because we use drive-through lanes now. When you put a box of food in somebody's car, and you look through the windshield and give them a wave, sometimes they're smiling and sometimes they're crying, but for many, it is the one hopeful, optimistic, compassionate thing that will happen to them that entire day. And food is the most visceral human need. Without adequate nutrition, we can't expect people to address any other challenge."

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.



ORANJINA
GET A TASTE

MORE BY THIS WRITER

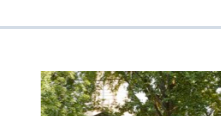
Anti-racist Arguments Are Tearing People Apart

CONOR FRIEDERSDORF



The Princeton Faculty's Anti-Free-Speech Demands

CONOR FRIEDERSDORF



Purity Politics Makes Nothing Happen

CONOR FRIEDERSDORF



ADVERTISEMENT

REACH

you

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs