Soup Kitchen Confidential. Feeding America's Hungry During COVID

- Carolyn Whelan
- October 7, 2020

"We needed a radically different approach," says Kathryn Garcia, New York City's Sanitation Commissioner and Food Czar, recalling how she and colleagues set about feeding the city's vulnerable over the pandemic, adding that traditional soup kitchens would not work as would-be diners socially-distanced to stop the spread. Hers was a 'wartime' post created by Mayor Bill De Blasio, requiring operations skills to fast-track food delivery under very trying circumstances. Garcia's early career stint at an urban development nonprofit, her logistics expertise and a lifetime in New York City all qualified her for the job. Her performance during the city's biggest ever blizzard helped clinch it, too.

She set about pivoting the city's system for feeding the needy to serve those unable to reach drop off points because of illness, age, disability or simply being off-the-grid. We "put it together and broke it as needed," she explains, noting grab-and-go meals with halal, vegetarian and kosher options available at over 500 'meal hubs' in schools – all handing out meals to anyone, not just children—no questions asked. There were also new "pop-up" farmers' markets offering free produce in places that were previously "food deserts"; new rest stops for truck drivers to feel safe as they hauled in fresh produce; and an army of taxi drivers (23,000 total) , airport logistics crews and catering teams hired to deliver and serve food to New York City's most vulnerable – some 120 million meals to date. "There was a lot of learning on the fly," she says.

These seat-of-the-pants moments are playing out across the US's fragmented, privately funded food distribution system for the neediest. In contrast to those of other rich countries, this system is heavily reliant on charitable organizations, with some support from federal government programs and funding. So-called food banks – national, regional and urban organizations, some with 600 or more employees, warehouses and sophisticated logistics –send bulk food in a hub-and-spokes model to food pantries in their network, which range from tiny rural churches to immense urban operations overseen by mega-charitable organizations like the United Way. In normal times, they expect to cater to some 37.2 million food insecure Americans (as of September 2019). The pandemic has changed that. Creating images reminiscent of Great Depression breadlines, during this pandemic cars backed up for miles for free groceries, as food banks struggled to meet demand as the number of hungry grew, and donations dried up. The number of Americans

not certain where their next meal will come from is now expected to surpass 54m this year– or roughly one in six Americans.

In April alone, US food insecurity tripled over March in households with children as free meals disappeared along with the schools where they'd been served. At one San Antonio Food Bank, daily food seekers shot up to 10,000 from under 400 at the start of the year. Calls to California's foodbank helplines are ten times their pre-pandemic levels.

And in New York City by April, nearly 1 in 3 food of its pantries had to shutter due to both a shortage of food or workers and higher costs to secure scant supply as food demand doubled, especially from first-time seekers. Historically the pantries were staffed by older folk (65-plus), some of whom struggled to cope. "It was chaos," observes Annelies Goger of Brookings. "But supply chains are adapting." Along with New York's Garcia, officials across the country are pulling new policy levers, aided by technology.

Useful food distribution technologies include tinder-type apps matching excess supply with demand, diverting from landfills some of the roughly 30% of food waste from discarded produce on farmland, restaurants and food nearing its sell-by-date. MEANS, for example, connects food banks to send surpluses to their peers.

New York State also launched a $25m Nourish New York program (with a focus on dairy products, eggs, meat and fresh produce; partners include Cabot Cheese and yoghurt maker Chobani), around the same time the US Department of Agriculture launched its Farmers to Families Program nationwide. This found willing suppliers in the farmers in upstate New York, who had been on the wrong end of a sudden loss of demand from traditional customers such as universities, hospitals, restaurants and caterers, and had begun to destroy suddenly unwanted supplies.

The government also allowed users of SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, previously knowns as food stamps) to buy food online from Amazon and Kroger. And old-school 311 hotline technology was used to help those in need without computers or smart phones.

There has also been tremendous innovation within the established strategic partnerships between cities and food banks and pantries. They reflect the creativity and resilience of a nation torn apart by a pandemic. For instance, Seattle recruited idled restaurant gig workers to deliver food and prescriptions to the elderly. Philadelphia set up food parcel pick-up locations in low-income housing buildings. Parking lots at San Francisco's Giants football stadium morphed into a drive-through distribution center, seemingly overnight. At one Silicon Valley food bank, the National Guard packed up to 20,000 food boxes a day. Through Dallas-based Get Shift Done, laid-off restaurant workers in Texas and Arkansas did

the same. Houston's Food Bank tapped out-of-work United Airlines baggage handlers to clean and pack food in an airport hangar. One Bay Area food bank is using driverless Chevy Bolts to drop off food. An Indiana food bank hired processors to slaughter hogs when meatpacking plants shuttered after some of them became infection hotspots. The University of Chicago repurposed its dining facility into a meal-making operation for South side of Chicago pantries. As initiatives such as these have stabilized supply chains, most food pantries are open again, and working well.

The biggest worry now for Garcia and her counterparts across the country are what might lie ahead, as the economy continues to struggle (especially if a second wave of infections prompts further severe lockdowns). "We can expect heightened food insecurity for some years because of lost jobs," says Elaine Waxman of the Urban Institute. At the same time as unemployment has soared (it topped 31m in July), emergency food delivery program and other jobless benefits and moratoriums on evictions are starting to be wound down. Temporary warehouses, such as stadiums, may steadily revert to their intended purposes. Meanwhile, the pandemic has removed much of the historic stigma about visiting a food pantry.

Technology, strategic partnerships and creativity will at least help keep New York City fed this winter. Some $170m the city earmarked in April for a "massive scale" feeding effort, and tighter ties between the City's Departments of Emergency Management, Environmental Protection, Parks, Aging, Sanitation, Education and Transportation forged during the first wave should help if there is a second. "It's all about logistics, the nitty gritty of the last mile served," explains Garcia, underscoring the need to focus on inventory, shifts, supply chains, and team-building. She recommends building more cold storage facilities and more local food manufacturing this round. The crisis has played well to Garcia's skills, so far – prompting her to run next year to be mayor of a rebuilding New York City.

On September 8, Garcia resigned from her post in protest of severe budget cuts to her agency and a planned run for Mayor.