I don’t need to tell you this has been a crazy few months, but I would love to tell you about how the Survival Center has risen to meet the challenges brought about by the pandemic. We are proud to have acted quickly, with boldness and creativity, thanks to an outpouring of community effort and generosity.

Our early, urgent response
At the beginning of March, as the notion of “flattening the curve” took hold, we began offering extra food during every visit, hoping to support clients in staying at home. As visitors to the Center know, we run a lean operation, moving thousands of pounds of food in and out of our long, narrow building every day. Within a few weeks, even our intense safety precautions didn’t feel like enough to protect our clients in what we normally hail as an intimate, personal-shopper experience inside a busy pantry environment.

By mid-March we had moved our food distribution outdoors, bringing pre-bagged food to folks in their cars. This arrangement worked well for clients, who were kept distant and safe, and we were pleased to have been able to make this early and decisive transition for their sake. Our indoor space, however, was too busy for social distancing, especially as the demand for food was rapidly mounting. Vital to our daily operation, more and more of our hundreds of volunteers—many of them in their 60s, 70s, and 80s—understandably began to feel the need to stay home.

The task of moving out more food with fewer people began to take its toll in late March, as exhaustion set in and four of seven staff members became sick or unable to come to the office. Medical and public health experts advised us to assume we’d all been exposed to the virus, though testing protocols didn’t enable us to know for sure. With our team rapidly depleted and in light of the potential risk, the only responsible option was to close the building on March 27 and regroup.

Building the Community Food Distribution Project
We were immediately in touch with our large network of community partners, and a collaboration with Grow Food Northampton and Community Action Pioneer Valley quickly took shape. Within days, we had firmed up plans for a new food distribution model, with backing from the City of Northampton and its public school system, Florence Bank, the Food Bank, Community Foundation, and many others.

Just one week later, on April 6, we launched the Community Food Distribution Project. Centered at nearby Jackson Street School, the project offers drive-up food distribution from 12 to 3 every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Clients are encouraged to return weekly for pre-bagged groceries, which include shelf-stable, refrigerated, and frozen foods, as well as bountiful fresh produce.

With a focus on supporting local agriculture, Grow Food Northampton buys produce from area farms, amplifying our reach by delivering groceries around town.

We are proud to have acted quickly, with boldness and creativity, thanks to an outpouring of community effort and generosity.

Lots of people in this community are needing help with food for the first time. That’s why we’re here.

We know, better than most, how easy it can be to find yourself having trouble making ends meet. COVID-19 has led to hardship for many, and that’s why hundreds of individuals and organizations are making sure that we are equipped to help those who need it. You are not alone, and we’re here to help you, with warm greetings and an easy, safe process.

No paperwork and no judgment. See details inside.
WHEN YOUR SHOPPING LIST NEEDS TO FEED 1,100
A behind-the-scenes look at ordering 17,000 pounds of groceries every week

BY SARAH PEASE, PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Familiar needs, unfamiliar scale
We’ve seen a dramatic increase in client need since the start of the pandemic, and have responded by providing more food, more often, from more locations. I’m especially proud of the quantity of produce we’re distributing, as these fresh fruits and vegetables are the most important items for many of our families.

Providing a variety of foods has been an especially high priority for me in this new setup. Ordinarily, our clients have a choice in selecting their groceries at our pantry. Now, to preserve social distancing, we’ve had to move to a pre-bagged system. In exchange, I make sure to order a variety of foods that I think most people will be able to use, so that each package is nutritionally balanced and interesting.

We start by creating shelf-stable bags—one for every person in each household—which include protein, fruit, vegetable, grain, soup, and a tomato product. To meet the week’s needs I order at least 1,100 of each of those staples. Each household also receives a bag of assorted foods with things like cereal, spices, peanut butter, trail mix, raisins, or juice—that’s another 650 of each of those items every week.

Then we prepare bags of about five pieces of fresh produce per person, plus an “extra” for the household, like bananas or grape tomatoes. This means ordering at least 6,000 produce items a week, on top of what Grow Food Northampton buys from local farmers. For clients who get their groceries at the school where we have refrigeration, we can also provide fresh milk, frozen meat, and sometimes eggs, cheese, or other dairy items.

Getting creative
Every week I place about twelve food orders—three each at the Food Bank, Our Family Farms, and Black River Produce, plus one or two orders each from Aldi and Sysco. And sometimes we still need to scramble to the grocery store when something doesn’t arrive as expected due to supply chain issues.

Placing orders, I have to take into account many moving pieces, like finding volunteers who can pick up at specifically scheduled times at the Food Bank, or ensuring there is room in the van for all the food. Besides the Food Bank, finding other reliable, affordable sources isn’t easy. It takes a lot of flexibility, a willingness to make last-minute changes, and the forethought to ask many questions in order to head off potential surprises.

And then there’s pre-bagging produce. Who knew it was such a science? I try to strike a balance between ease of packaging, distributing, keeping it fresh, and offering a rotating variety. Because we prepare bags in advance of distribution, I try to prioritize items that don’t require refrigeration—apples, pears, oranges, bananas, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and garlic. But we do also offer carrots and a few more delicate items such as peppers and tomatoes. The fun of it is when I find foods that provide our clients more variety—something special, like fresh pineapple.

Meeting new challenges
In April we saw a surge in new clients—nearly ten times the number we would see in an ordinary April. And yet, there are many of our regular clients who haven’t been able to get food from us in recent months. We are reaching out to them to make sure they know how to get help, and that they can send a neighbor or friend to get food for them. I want to make sure that people who are newly struggling with food insecurity know we’re here and ready to welcome them.
In the first month of the new distribution, we saw 63 new clients per month. In the first month of the new distribution, we saw 552 new clients.

A New Food Distribution Model Unfolds in Real Time

To view an up-to-date photo essay of our food distribution, see the link in the orange alert banner at www.northamptonsurvival.org

Week of April 6: The food distribution system begins to take shape. Food arrives at Jackson Street School from the Food Bank. Traffic flow is configured. Wellness screenings for volunteers and staff are underway, and distancing protocols are established. In light of grocery store shortages, all households receive arollment of a bread and a loaf of past. Grass Food, Northwest Community Action’s existing Tuesday deliveries to Florence Heights, Hampshire Heights, Meadowbrook Apartments, David Thorne, Action Pioneer Valley Workers Center, Spruce Street, and senior-living facilities around the city.

Meeting food needs and more—in a stay-at-home environment

During the pandemic, I’m sitting at one of the housing complexes that is receiving deliveries, and I’m pondering over a number of factors.

issen, potatoes, and carrots as part of other Survivor Center delivery days. I’ve been to dozens of gardens, but her supply started to diminish, so she only went for a few weeks, and then she started to see signs of the Center in an essential fashion.

Before the pandemic we averaged 63 new clients per month. In the first month of the new distribution, we saw 552 new clients.

In Northampton, we deliver from 8 to 12 locations throughout the city, in collaboration with Grass Food, Northampton and Community Action Pioneer Valley.

We are immensely grateful to these organizations for their generous contributions that helped launch the Community Action Pioneer Valley food delivery program.

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By publication date, we expect to have resumed food delivery in the Hilltowns (see below). Food will be provided outdoors, using social distancing precautions.

For the most current details on our hours and operations and to find out how to make a donation or volunteer, please visit www.northamptonsurvival.org/covid-19.

HOW TO GET THE HELP YOU NEED

New and existing Survivor Center clients—all in our service area who find themselves in need of food assistance—are encouraged to come for help.

In Northampton, we deliver from 12 locations throughout the city, in collaboration with Grass Food, Northampton and Community Action Pioneer Valley.

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, food is available outside Jackson Street School at 150 Jackson Street.

On Tuesday, food is delivered from 1 to noon to members of the Pioneer Valley Workers Center and residents at Hampshire Heights, Florence Heights, Meadowbrook Apartments, and The Lumber Yard.

On Thursday, food is delivered midday to the senior housing centers: McDonald House, Michael’s House, Walter Lake House, Take Five Apartments, Cahil Apartments, and Totem Manor.

In the Hilltowns, we are planning to have resumed food distribution at the Hilltown Pantry in the Town Office Building in Hadley by the end of May.

To start, hours will be available on Wednesdays from 11 to 3 p.m. Food will be provided outdoors, using social distancing precautions.

Before the pandemic we averaged 2,300 client visits per month. In the first month of the new distribution, we had 5,116 client visits.
We have been fortunate to have had 40 years of steadfast service from board members who carry out our important work. Here are the dedicated members currently serving.

**Board of Directors**
Debin Bruce, President
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Michael Skillcorn, Treasurer
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Angela Combest
Lisa Downing
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Donor Relations Coordinator
Carlos Rivera
Pantry Manager
Artemis Kampner
Pantry Coordinator

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Introducing our two newest staff members

Cher Willems
CFO, the Mo Willems Studio, Inc.

Chantelle Leswell
Office Manager

Artemis Kampner
Pantry Coordinator