

Cleveland, Ohio residents wait hours in food bank drive-thru line as unemployment skyrockets

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On Tuesday, March 24, the Greater Cleveland Food Bank held its second drive-thru food giveaway to support individuals and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Aided by volunteers and soldiers from the Ohio National Guard, the food bank served roughly 4,000 people from 1,500 households.

Since the initiation of Ohio's shelter in place order, the anti-hunger group has seen a significant increase in need. The food bank has also switched its regular scheduled walk-in hours to appointment-only and established weekly drive-thrus.

The line for last week's event snaked through surrounding city streets, with some individuals reporting a two-hour wait. Others parked their cars and walked to avoid the wait as well as out of fear that the food bank would run out of donations. As the event neared closing hours, many were turned away by police officers.

Two-thirds of the individuals at Tuesday's drive-in had never before sought assistance from the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and one-third have never before sought assistance from any food bank or emergency food assistance program.

This fact exposes the dire conditions under which many working class and poor Ohioans live. Facing unemployment due to shelter-in-place "stay at home" orders which went into effect on March 23, many workers have no savings and no ability to put food on the table without seeking assistance from food banks. In northeast Ohio, 1 in 6 people already faced food insecurity, and as one of the largest hunger relief organizations in the region, the Greater Cleveland Food Bank served more than 350,000 people in 2019.

As Ohio's unemployment rates continue to rise, the

Greater Cleveland Food Bank will require significantly more resources to meet the increased in need. A larger location for the drive-thru, offsite storage and an increase in the bank's phone system capacity were just a few needs outlined in a recent press release. The food bank is fielding approximately 800 calls every day, an increase from an average of 100 daily calls before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many calls are likely for the food bank's "help center" which answers questions and walks people through applications for programs such as SNAP or unemployment claims.

The Greater Cleveland Food Bank estimates that the coronavirus pandemic could cost the organization an additional \$170,000 or more per week. This figure is on top of the regular operation costs that at current capacity provides roughly 1 million pounds of food per week.

The charity is also attempting to seek state approval to waive income requirements. Food bank workers report that the requirements are impractical during the current conditions.

The press release noted, "Imagine a Food Bank employee asking an 82-year-old woman, in the front seat of her car, to yell a bit louder with her address and monthly income so it can be heard from a safe distance over the sounds of a crowded parking lot and a line of cars three miles long. It embarrasses the senior, slows down distribution, and poses a safety risk if the employee leans in to provide the senior with privacy or hear her better."

The food bank is also working to increase its Backpacks For Kids program, a service which, before the pandemic hit was providing emergency assistance to over 3,500 families a week.

Across the United States, the number of unemployed is surging with new filings for state unemployment benefits reaching 3.28 million last week. This total is the highest one-week number of new claims ever recorded, topping the previous week's claims of 282,000 by over 1,000 percent.

Ohio saw the second-highest new unemployment filings in the nation with 187,784 new claims, an increase from 4,815 received over the same five-day period the previous week. This number is expected grow even further with Lieutenant Governor Jon Husted reporting that the state's unemployment website had recorded 1.7 million hits in the last five days.

Following a request by the US Department of Labor, state officials are ceasing to announce regular numeric unemployment figures. Instead, as the email suggested, state officials should, "provide information using generalities to describe claims levels (very high, large increase)" until federal data which accounts for the entire country is released once a week.

The sharp increase in food insecurity is just one example of the COVID-19 pandemic's exposure of the inability of the capitalist system to address any of the problems of mass society. This catastrophe is not simply a result of the deadly virus but a product of the destruction of social programs and infrastructure over the past four decades under Democratic and Republican administrations at the municipal, state and national level.



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