Hundreds wait in mile-long line at Pittsburgh area food bank

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1 April 2020

Hundreds of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area residents waited for hours in a mile-long line up of cars Monday to receive two boxes of food being given out by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank.

Workers began lining up in their cars at 7 a.m., hours before the noon start of the drive-thru food bank, demonstrating the surge of need as thousands in the Pittsburgh region have been thrown out of their jobs as the coronavirus pandemic takes hold.

Since March 23, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf has been gradually expanding a county by county stay at home order which initially only applied to seven counties and now encompasses nearly half of them, closing all non-essential businesses—hitting workers in the retail, restaurant and service industries especially hard.

Residents of these counties, including the Pittsburgh metro area, have been directed to remain in their homes as much as possible to help stop the spread of COVID-19. As of Tuesday, the coronavirus has killed 63 people in Pennsylvania and 4,843 infections have been confirmed across the state.

When Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank volunteers began passing out the food parcels over 300 cars were already waiting. Police set up port-a-johns along the line so that people wouldn't have to give up their place in line.

Video taken by Andrew Rush, a staff photographer for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, of the line and posted on his Twitter account shows the double-lane line of cars snaking more than a mile as people waited hours for their turn.

Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank volunteers had put together packages for 1,700 families. Each car received two boxes, one filed with canned and dry goods, the other with frozen meat. Foodbank officials hoped that the food could last a small family for five days.

Pennsylvania saw a huge surge in need as the COVID-19 pandemic spread. Last week, over 350,000 people signed up for unemployment benefits as retail, restaurants, offices and many factories sent their workers home. Many workers in the tenuous "gig economy" such as Uber and Lyft drivers suddenly found themselves with no work.

The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank sits on the site of the former US Steel Duquesne works which was closed down in the 1980s along with mills and factories up and down the three rivers that make up the Pittsburgh region. Over one hundred of thousand workers lost their jobs during this time.

Jobs that replaced them paid only a fraction of the wages, often without benefits and often temporary and part-time. Prior to the onset of the pandemic poverty in the mill towns of McKeesport, Duquesne, Braddock, Munhall, Aliquippa and many others was two, three and four times the national average.

The situation in Pittsburgh is being repeated throughout the country as more than 3.5 million workers filed for unemployment last week and millions more are expected to do the same this week. Food banks are using drive through events to help keep both recipients and staff safe from COVID-19 infection.

In Cleveland hundreds lined up in their cars to wait for food last week, and hundreds more are expected today as the event is repeated.

In San Diego, California, food bank volunteers set up in the parking lot of the SDCCU Stadium for a drive-thru event where 1,000 families were given food. Many others were turned away as supplies ran out.

From North Carolina to Dayton, Ohio, Maine, San Francisco and almost every other area of the country similar hours long line-ups for food are happening

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every day.

"With 4 in 10 Americans unable to cover a $400 emergency, this will be the next phase of this pandemic. Sure, right now we're looking for ventilators. But with millions upon millions of newly unemployed, it's going to be a huge task to make sure people even get food," commented Twitter user Max Schaefer.

"Economy has not been strong the last 12 years. The corporations and really rich have gotten richer. Regular folks just living day to day. Thanks for $1,200 that will solve everything," HuskerFast tweeted, referring to the stimulus check many Americans will receive from the stimulus bill signed by President Donald Trump last week. The bill also funnels more than $1 trillion to Wall Street and big business.

The explosion in demand for help from food banks underscores the longstanding reality that while Pittsburgh and many other cities have boomed for some, and the stock market has soared to dizzying heights, millions of Americans remain in poverty or just on the verge of destitution.

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