



'Whole new set of people reaching out for food stamps to put food on the table'



Patrick McAlevey, of Lindenhurst, is struggling to make ends meet after he lost his job in March due to the pandemic. McAlevey is still waiting for his unemployment money. Credit: Newsday / Thomas A. Ferrara / Danielle Silverman

By Craig Schneider

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They are the faces on the food lines, the callers on hold for hours to get benefits, the mothers and fathers breaking down and asking for help. The coronavirus pandemic cut their lifeline to a salary and benefits, sending many plummeting into Long Island's safety net of food pantries, food stamps and unemployment benefits.

They are the first wave of Long Islanders hit the hardest by the COVID-19 shutdown.

Some were already on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. But there are those who were doing well who lost their jobs and, after a few months, no longer have the savings to sustain them, said Rebecca

Sanin, president of the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island.

“We’re seeing issues of hunger explode,” Sanin said. “There’s a whole new set of people reaching out for food stamps to put food on the table.”

Applications for food stamps have doubled on Long Island — to 17,717 in February through April — compared with this time last year. One food bank, Island Harvest Food Bank, has distributed more than 1 million pounds of food during the crisis. Over the past two months, more than 287,000 Long Islanders — roughly a fifth of all working residents — filed for unemployment.

Worse, those running the food banks and other charities said they see tougher times ahead.

Adrian Fassett, chief executive officer for the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk, said people have received protections from the government, but "wait for three or four months when people have to pay rent and mortgages. It's going to get worse."

Here are their stories.



Michelle Acompora, 36, of Brentwood, is a freelance hairstylist who hasn't worked since mid-March. She's nervous as she has two small children: Karter, 5, and Krisette, 9. Credit: Michelle Acompora

Michelle Acompora, 36, Brentwood

March was a cruel month for Acompora and her kids. Because of the shutdown, the freelance hair stylist saw her income blow away.

In addition, her father had a heart attack March 25 and remained in a coma for 18 days before he died. Even as she grieved the loss, Acompora, a single mom, was having trouble putting food on the table for her two children, Karter, 5, and Krisette, 9.

“So much has changed in so little time,” she said. “It’s so hard to think about the future.”

Acompora applied for unemployment insurance but was denied because she was self-employed, she said. She said she's trying to reverse that, but it's so hard getting through on the phone.

She received a stimulus check for \$2,200, but much of that went to her father’s cremation. He had no life insurance, she said. She couldn’t afford a funeral service.

The bills, however, keep coming. Her savings of about \$5,000 shrank quickly. She's already late on a month's worth of bills for the utilities, car insurance and mortgage.

"You get a three-month grace period," she said of the mortgage protections put in place by the state. "But you still have to pay it back."

In April, she applied for food stamps and is now receiving \$500 a month. Friends have helped out with cash here and there. The kids are getting free breakfasts and lunches through the schools.

"I'm not at rock bottom," she said. "Actually, I probably am at rock bottom."

Acompora said she tries to hide the stress from the children, but it comes through, sometimes in odd ways.

"I'll start crying — anytime," she said.

The stress of the coronavirus has taken a toll on her son, Karter. He's used to giving everyone a hug and going outside.

For her daughter, Krisette, the stress has expressed itself differently.

"She's taught herself how to pray," Acompora said. "She asks to be strong, for her grandpa to watch over us."



Patrick McAlevey, in front of his Lindenhurst home, was hit with hard times after he was laid off from his job as a truck driver. Credit: Newsday / Thomas A. Ferrara

Patrick McAlevey, 59, Lindenhurst

Since McAlevey was furloughed from his job as a truck driver two months ago, he largely has been sitting in his rented room watching TV. He's bored and hates it, he said.

Like many people, he's applied for unemployment benefits but hasn't seen a dime. When he finally got someone on the phone, they said the money would be coming in the mail. That was on Easter.

To make matters worse, the engine in his 2005 Jeep Cherokee died in March, further stranding him in the rented room.

"I have nowhere to go. I'm broke, I'm bored," he said, adding that he hasn't paid the weekly rent of \$280 in eight weeks.

Most of his food comes from the 7-Eleven store and diner down the street. His mother and daughter cook for him as well. He's also considering applying for food stamps.

"At first I said no" to applying for food stamps, he said. "But now I'm thinking about it. I was kind of too proud."

A trucker for 30 years, he knows there are jobs out there, but they seem unreachable.

"I don't have a computer, and I don't know how to use one," he said.

A Navy veteran, McAlevey said the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk is looking to find him a place in veterans housing.

"I think they may have found me a place in Huntington," he said. "I can get out of this place."

His savings are down to a couple of hundred dollars in a checking account, he said.

"I'm not proud of all this," he said. "I'm not some irresponsible 19-year-old."



John Finn, 57, of Riverhead, is an electrician who's seen little work since mid-March. Credit: John Finn

John Finn, 57, Riverhead

Finn is waiting. Waiting for his first unemployment check. Waiting for construction to start up again. Waiting for his boss to call him back to his job as an electrician.

Living in a rented room, his rent paid by a local nonprofit, he has little to do — and little money to do it with, he said.

"I'm as down as I've ever been," he said. "I'm a skilled laborer, but it doesn't really matter."

His life was coming together in the months before the COVID-19 shutdown. After bouncing around from place to place, the Navy combat veteran, who had tracked submarines during the conflicts in Nicaragua and Panama, had settled into a new job. He was working full time for an electrical company in the Hamptons.

"God willing, it's going to come back very soon," he said.

As for affording food, he said the occasional job has provided that pocket money.

For now, he spends a lot of his time writing. He's working on a pulp fiction novel, and he's writing poems. Here's part of one, called "Virus."

"A new awareness of fragility for us all

And an anger for the anguish of this awful squall

The world now practices social distancing

God only knows what this spring will bring."



Before the COVID-19 shutdown, Aretha Alonzo, 50, of Medford, said she was juggling three jobs. Credit: Aretha Alonzo

Aretha Alonzo, 50, Medford

The good people come forward. Alonzo has seen that first hand.

Before the COVID-19 shutdown, she was successfully juggling three jobs — a food service worker, a home aide, and a teacher's assistant at a preschool — all paying about minimum wage. She estimates she was making between \$35,000 and \$40,000 a year.

It wasn't a fortune, but for a single woman living with two grown children going to college, she was getting by.

When the shutdown hit in mid-March, she was placed on furlough from the teacher's assistant job, and she now estimates she's making about \$22,000 a year.

Two months on, and she's behind on her rent, car insurance and utilities. She received her stimulus check of \$1,200, but that went to the landlord. She still owes him \$2,000 in rent.

"I had no money to buy food," she said.

Her pastor heard about her plight, and he showed up last week at her door with box of groceries. The people at the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk gave her gift cards to Stop & Shop, but those are gone.

Friends and family helped, \$30 or \$40 at a time, so she had gas money to go to work.

Meanwhile, the summer tuition is due soon for college. Alonzo had taken pride in paying for her kids' college tuition, so they could attend full time, but this year is going to be tough. Her daughter, Tashea, 30, had been

working in the same preschool and also lost her job.

Alonzo can't obtain unemployment benefits since she's still working the two jobs. She said she's going to look into obtaining food stamps.

"I've had to learn to shop with coupons pretty fast," Alonzo said. "It's no longer Welch's grape juice; it's the \$1.99 off brand."

The people at the preschool have told her that she'll be rehired once the economy opens back up.

"Furloughed?" she said. "I've never known these terms."

The stress of the financial struggle comes on top of the fears of the coronavirus, she said.

"It's like living in a caution zone," she said.

She added, "I have good days and bad. When you think about all you're going through, and all you can't do, it affects you. It's like that old saying, 'You smile to keep from crying.'"

Correction: The Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk is working to find Patrick McAlevey a place in veterans housing. An earlier version of this story misstated the name of the council.



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