

## Groups team up to aid homeless this weekend



Maidaya Maldonado, of Adelante of Suffolk County, and Marc Soto, of Pronto of Long Island, load toiletries, hand sanitizer and masks onto a bus in Bay Shore on Tuesday. Credit: Barry Sloan

By Carl MacGowan

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Updated March 3, 2021 5:59 PM

After seeing a sharp increase in visitors to their emergency food and housing programs — including many families who never required assistance before the COVID-19 pandemic — Brentwood-area nonprofits that primarily serve Latinos are taking the rare step of teaming up Saturday to aid homeless people.

The two groups, Pronto of Long Island and Adelante of Suffolk County, plan to form a caravan of trucks with dozens of volunteers ready to distribute hundreds of free meals, canned food, hand sanitizer, and stacks of clothing, said Pronto executive director Marc Soto and Adelante director Maidaya Maldonado.

The one-day tour, called Helping Everyone Love People, or HELP, will make four stops from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Saturday, including at two delicatessens, a McDonald's and a Domino's Pizza store.

In the year since COVID-19 began ravaging Long Island, poverty and hunger have skyrocketed in Latino communities — and it's likely that homelessness, too, is on the rise, Soto and Maldonado said.

"We do see the presence [of homelessness]. I believe the presence is greater than we even see," Soto said. "We know there's a homeless problem. ... Some people are losing their places of residence. I believe the demand is high."

Officials have said Latinos, Long Island's largest minority group with 535,000 residents, have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus. Nassau and Suffolk officials have stepped up efforts to offer vaccinations in Hispanic communities.

Latinos also have been devastated economically in the past year, Maldonado and Soto said.

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"I can say triple worse than before the pandemic," Maldonado said.

Pronto and Adelante initially had planned to distribute about 150 meals on Saturday, Maldonado said. But thanks to unexpectedly generous donations — from corporate donors as well as food banks such as Long Island Cares and Island Harvest — the groups will be able to quadruple the number of meals they'll give out, she

said.

"Something that was going to start very small now is going to be 500 meals," she said.

Similarly, the number of volunteers swelled from about 12 to 40 or more, Soto said.

Among the volunteers will be about 20 members of My Brother's Keeper, a student club at Brentwood High School, said club member Ezequiel Diaz, 17. The senior said the pandemic has left many Brentwood residents "traumatized."

"They're stuck all day at home. Some of them don't even have jobs," he said, adding he helps homeless people he sees by buying them gloves, bread and peanut butter. "To me, going out and helping at least one person is going to make my day. It puts a smile on my face every time I think we can bring some change on Saturday."

HELP is an unusual undertaking for Pronto and Adelante, which serve the same communities but offer slightly different services.

Bay Shore-based Pronto runs a food pantry, thrift shop and a warehouse that distributes donated furniture; Adelante, in Brentwood, offers housing and nutrition programs, an after-school program and career counseling for children, families and seniors.

For whatever reason, some recipients are loyal to one organization or the other, Maldonado and Soto said, adding they hope to change that perception by working together.

"We want to let them know that Adelante and Pronto have the same mission," Maldonado said. "We are here for them."

Maldonado said Adelante had typically served about 200 people a week before the coronavirus. Now the nonprofit sometimes serves hundreds of people in a single day. "Now we are seeing the families we never expect," she said.

Pronto served about 4,000 people a month before the pandemic, Soto said, adding that figure doubled in January and possibly grew even more in February.

Last Saturday alone, Pronto's pantry served about 600 people, he said. It frustrates him, Soto said, that he can't do more to help.

"The demand, unfortunately, had gone up 200% in any given month," Soto said. "We never know where we might run out of food or run out of any given item. ... On any given day, we may run out of meat or poultry. ... We don't serve our clients to the level they deserve."

### Help for the homeless

Pronto and Adelante will make four stops from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday. Each stop will last about 50 minutes.

- 4 p.m. La Placita deli, 92 Wicks Rd., Brentwood
- 5 p.m. McDonald's, Suffolk Avenue, Brentwood
- 6 p.m. Domino's Pizza, 167 Clarke St., Brentwood
- 7 p.m. Jocreña Bakery, 1056 Islip Ave., Brentwood

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Carl MacGowan is a Long Island native who covers Brookhaven Town after having previously covered Smithtown, Suffolk County courts and numerous spot news and feature stories over his 20-plus year career at Newsday.



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