

# A Christmas Eve Story — Strangers to Sisterhood

Emergency food assistance for families in quarantine over the holidays

By Claire Guevarra Concepcion  
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“Thank you! Merry Christmas!” the children excitedly chanted loud enough to be heard from behind the porch windowpane, spreading rays of hope on a cold, bleak and rainy Christmas eve. Volunteer Saoirse McClory and her husband have just dropped off groceries, homemade pumpkin pies and diapers to a family quarantined during the holidays—an arrangement facilitated by a collaboration of the Human Services Coalition 211 referral service, Mutual Aid Tompkins, Healthy Food For All and the Tompkins County COVID Food Task Force who are working together to ensure community members needing to quarantine and/or isolate have access to food.



“Imagine how distressing it could feel as a parent to suddenly find yourself unable to get what you need, and especially over the holidays” McClory shared.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing many community members to experience increased—or for the first time—food insecurity due to compounding losses of job or income, childcare and health care insurance, putting their health and financial stability at risk. Ithaca and surrounding towns are fortunate to have a strong network of food assistance resources, but the options for homebound populations are narrow, and depending on time required to verify eligibility, limited delivery schedules and other factors, these services can take a while to kick-in. On December 21st, the Health Department, Human Services Coalition and United Way started seeing a frightening trend of community members going into quarantine without food for dinner that evening, or the means to stock their fridges and cupboards to get them through the week.

Planning for emergencies isn’t easy when you’re already stretched for resources and barely have enough to get by. Public food assistance is dolled out in increments, so purchasing in bulk or receiving large quantities in advance isn’t usually an option, and neither is using SNAP (Food Stamps) to buy food online or pay for delivery services. What is a family to do to access food when they’re called by the health department because they either tested positive or need to isolate due to potential exposure, and stopping at the store, pantry or soup kitchen on the way home isn’t an option?

This gap in the ability to provide immediate food assistance for quarantining households throughout the county would only widen during the two-week holiday period when the food bank, pantries and meal delivery services close or operate on a more limited basis. The Tompkins County COVID-19 Food Task Force convened an emergency meeting to find a solution. The result—Mutual Aid volunteers signed up to be on-call everyday until January 4th, ready to mobilize upon contact by 211 who fields requests for emergency food assistance 24/7. Healthy Food For All arranged for volunteers to get food from local farms, GreenStar Co-op and St. John’s Pantry.

McClory was the first of a dozen volunteers to respond and provide food to a family in need. In past years without a worldwide pandemic, McClory normally would be busy cooking and baking for a house full of family and friends, but this holiday season, she volunteered to gather, prepare and deliver food to community members in quarantine. McClory and her husband delivered what they considered to be modest assistance with basic food items and ingredients for Christmas dinner on December 24th to an extremely grateful family.

“It felt like an honor to show up for others at a time like this. It was an opportunity to provide food that we usually would share with family and share it with strangers instead and through this come to find that they aren’t strangers at all. I felt an immediate and unexpected sisterhood with the grandmother.”

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McClory added that the people who staff 211, Healthy Food For All, Mutual Aid Tompkins and so many other “caring entities” inspire her with their generosity and the attention they give to vulnerable populations and appreciation and care for volunteers such as herself.

“In times of so much uncertainty and despair, there are stark illustrations of kindness and hope in our community. It is clear how vital these organizations are and I am constantly inspired by their work. We have great examples of how we might aspire to live right at our doorstep.”

Liz Karabinakis, Director of Healthy Food For All and member of the County’s COVID Food Task Force adds an acknowledgement for the critical support from local foundations, businesses and private donors for their key role in making COVID response work possible. “Our community is fortunate to be supported by the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, United Way of Tompkins County, our local Emergency Food and Shelter Program, GreenStar Food Co-op, Headwater and PressBay Food Hubs, Regional Access and dozens of family-owned farms in the area. Many of our community’s collaborative efforts to address food insecurity couldn’t happen without the genuinely caring and dedicated people at our local foundations, non-profit organizations, agencies, businesses and the generosity of donors.”

## To support COVID emergency food assistance

**Donations can be made securely online at:**

[www.HealthyFoodForAll.org/Mission/Covid/](http://www.HealthyFoodForAll.org/Mission/Covid/)

**Please mail checks to:**

Healthy Food For All – CCE Tompkins  
c/o Cooperative Extension  
615 Willow Ave, Ithaca NY, 14850

### **MORE INFO**

**[211 Tompkins/Cortland](#)** – Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County

Information and Referral (211) connects people in need with services designed to address that need by providing a central telephone information service, chat line, and maintaining a data base of community information. Callers are referred to service providers according to their situation. For more info, contact John Mazzello, Director of Community Services, [jmazzello@hsctc.org](mailto:jmazzello@hsctc.org) / 607-273-8686.

**[Mutual Aid Tompkins](#)** – Neighbors Supporting Neighbors

Neighbors concerned about our communities and helping to make sure those most vulnerable and affected by COVID-19 get the help they need. Resources include Food Cabinets with non-perishable food available for anyone located throughout the county. For more info, contact [communityaidtompkins@gmail.com](mailto:communityaidtompkins@gmail.com)

**[Healthy Food For All & Nourish Tompkins](#)** – Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County

Since 2006, Healthy Food For All has been providing hundreds of low-income households every year with reliable and dignified access to locally grown fruits and vegetables via Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, coupled with nutrition and culinary education. During the pandemic, Nourish Tompkins was initiated to expand services to provide over 10,500 pounds of local produce and 2,000 healthy meals with hunger relief partners to thousands of food-insecure community members. For more info, contact Liz Karabinakis, Director, [evk4@cornell.edu](mailto:evk4@cornell.edu) / 607-272-2292 x 242

**[Tompkins County COVID-19 Food Task Force](#)**

Coordinates the efforts of over 70 entities involved in the hunger relief equation. For more info, contact Holly Payne, Task Force Coordinator, [hp67@cornell.edu](mailto:hp67@cornell.edu)