
For Immediate Release

#20-20

NEW YORKERS FIND WAYS TO HELP THOSE IN NEED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

June 15, 2020 — As the coronavirus pandemic has deeply affected businesses, social services and schools across the city, New Yorkers eager to be a lifeline to those affected are volunteering in traditional and non-traditional (virtual) opportunities on behalf of agencies and organizations working with the City’s Volunteer Coordination Task Force (VCTF).

New York City Emergency Management along with New York Cares, NYC Service and its partner, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), created the VCTF in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy to assist New Yorkers with centralizing and coordinating volunteer efforts during emergencies. For the COVID-19 response, VCTF has transformed many of its volunteer opportunities to include revamping operations to meet COVID-19 safety protocols, and in many cases, completing virtual operations.

“The Volunteer Coordination Task Force was developed after seeing the success and power of the volunteer response to Hurricane Sandy. Volunteers traveled from across the country, and many New Yorkers stepped up to volunteer their time and expertise to meet the needs within their own communities,” **said Herman Schaffer, assistant commissioner of community outreach at New York City Emergency Management.** “As we looked closer to see what more could have been done to assist these volunteers, it was clear that a task force made up of both public and non-profit partners could provide important support, coordination, and guidance to keep them safe. We have seen the success of these planning efforts with our response to COVID-19.”

In addition to the health impacts related to COVID-19, the pandemic has intensified the need for support in areas such as mental health and food distribution. As New Yorkers adjust to social distancing guidelines, they are experiencing social isolation from friends and family that is creating a high demand for mental health experts, volunteers conducting wellness checks, and other support.

“The Volunteer Coordination Task Force supports New Yorkers and the nonprofit sector by uniting New Yorkers in service during crises to ensure resources reach those most impacted,” **said NYC Chief Service Officer, Anusha Venkataraman.** “Throughout the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, volunteers have powered emergency response efforts, which have been essential to the safety, health, and strength of both residents and communities.”

The task force relies on volunteers like Melissa Herrera, who, after moving to New York in November 2019, was eager to lend a hand. She is part of a group of trained phone bank volunteers for the New York City Department of Education. The volunteers make calls to support the technology needs of parents with children transitioning to distance learning.

“Volunteering is something that I did in high school and college, and from a personal standpoint it has always helped me feel connected with the new community that I live in,” **Herrera** said.

“There are many families who are struggling with the technology and who also aren’t English speakers. They were really appreciative because no one had called about just basic (technology) things.”

For the Xavier Mission — a VCTF community partner — food access and older adult support are two of the in-demand services they provide. Whether it is through their food pantry or soup kitchen, the sharp decline of visits from vulnerable New Yorkers at the outset of the pandemic was a sign that a new way to deliver services was necessary. To provide food to families and seniors, Xavier Mission has partnered with the Sirens Women Motorcycle Club to deliver groceries to over 100 families. While the available traditional opportunities to volunteer have changed, what drives people to volunteer has evolved into a greater cause during this crisis.

“We decided to deliver groceries to the senior households in April, and have those who were capable come pick up the groceries. We realized very quickly that not many people came, many were scared to go outside and use public transportation,” **said Cassandra L. Agredo, executive director of the Xavier Mission**. “In May we decided to deliver to all households. We are doing that as well for June and July.”

Under normal circumstances, The Xavier soup kitchen provides dine-in opportunities for their visitors, seating 300-400 people at any given time. They serve approximately 1,200 meals a week. The soup kitchen has now transitioned into a grab-and-go distribution site with a smaller volunteer staff to accommodate social distancing protocols. They distribute 1,400 to 1,500 lunch bags every Sunday.

“Volunteering during the pandemic helps people have control over the situation. They feel helpless, it is a terrible feeling,” **Agredo said**. “To be able to do something that is very specific contributes to the feeling of regaining some sense of power and control. You see people suffering, and that’s why they volunteer.”

Since relief efforts began over two months ago, New York Cares has deployed more than 13,500 volunteers totaling more than 40,000 hours on nearly 2,000 projects. The nonprofit has helped distribute 1.8 million meals with its partners, including on-the-ground programs that target food insecurity and virtual programs that focus on education, mental wellness and physical health.

“Through our partnership with the City, New York Cares was able to quickly adapt our operations to have direct impact on the areas of greatest need,” **said New York Cares Executive Director, Gary Bagley**. “As a result of outreach to 500 hunger organizations, we have helped serve quadruple the number of meals compared to this time last year, while also introducing telephone outreach services for the first time serving isolated seniors and families managing remote learning.”

Aisha Greene has been a New York Cares volunteer for the last eight years. During the pandemic, she is conducting wellness checks to homebound seniors through The Actors Fund.

The fund is a human services organization focused on the needs of the entertainment community. During the weekly calls, volunteers like Greene ask the retired artists about their food supply, medical needs and overall health.

“Volunteerism is such a part of my life that if I don’t do it, it feels like something is wrong,” said Greene, who is an assistant district attorney with the Bronx District Attorney’s Office.

“People have told me that this is the call they look forward to all week, because it is the only human interaction they have right now. During this pandemic you have the social distancing, but it’s really the emotional distancing where people are struggling.”

The calls are generated by a software system to keep the identities of the client and volunteer private, and while they often follow a script, those five minutes on the phone offer the opportunity to recreate the human connection that many isolated New Yorkers are missing. It is the reason many volunteers are committed to the work.

The American Red Cross in the Greater New York Region is also a VCTF partner. During the COVID-19 response, they have deployed more than 2,500 volunteers who are working with local community partners to support feeding and supply distribution efforts for vulnerable families and other groups, including healthcare workers. The Red Cross has also delivered personal supplies to healthcare workers at hospitals, meals to nursing homes with the Salvation Army, and food to the elderly through community programs.

“The humanitarian work of the Red Cross would not be possible without our dedicated volunteers. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, these selfless New Yorkers have continued to support families impacted by local disasters, like home fires, and they have taken on new initiatives, teaming up with NYC partners to support vulnerable communities impacted by the coronavirus and frontline hospital workers. Thank you to NYC for recognizing their contributions,” said Susan Rounds, interim CEO, American Red Cross in Greater NY.

As New York City now enters the recovery phase of the pandemic, VCTF will continue to redesign new volunteer opportunities for those wishing to get involved. For volunteer opportunities, you can visit [NYC.gov/helpnow](https://nyc.gov/helpnow) or call [311](tel:311).

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