

Challenges and opportunities facing food banks under COVID-19

Greater Chicago Food Depository CEO Kate Maehr looks back on 2020, the challenge of rising food insecurity, and ways the private sector can get involved.



In this interview, McKinsey's Roberto Uchoa chats with Kate Maehr, executive director and CEO of the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Kate Maehr reflects on 2020 and both the challenges and opportunities the charitable food system faced this year. An edited transcript of the interview follows.

Roberto Uchoa: Kate, so good to have you here today. But before we start, I would love it if you could tell us a little bit more about the Greater Chicago Food Depository and the work that you do within Cook County.

Kate Maehr: Sure, and thank you so much for having me. The Greater Chicago Food Depository is the food bank that serves Cook County, Illinois. We are a part of the amazing network known as the Feeding America Network that serves every county in this country. And here in Cook County we work in partnership with 700 community-based organizations: food pantries, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, after-school programs for children that operate in every one of Chicago's neighborhoods and in every suburban community in Cook County. Before the pandemic began, together this network was serving more than 800,000 of our neighbors.

Roberto Uchoa: Wow. And actually, you touched on a good point. 2020 has been a year with many different crises, from health to social unrest, the consequence of unemployment created by COVID—can you tell us, how has your team operated during 2020, and what are some of the lessons learned from this year?

Kate Maehr: Let me start by saying that if I would have had the opportunity ... and I probably did, because we've had incredible support from the McKinsey team ... the opportunity to talk with a group of people in January of 2020, I would have talked about the fact that we were seeing staggering need. And now, of course, I will look back at January 2020 as the best of times. Because almost

immediately, within days of when COVID-19 began to appear in Illinois and in Cook County, we saw this surge of need all across the community. It happened quickly, it was dramatic, and it has stayed with us. Within weeks we were serving 120% more people than we had been serving in early March, so that just gives you an idea of how rapidly the need increased.

As a result, our operations have had to increase significantly and rapidly. It felt like, on a dime we had to turn and figure out how to navigate a complex and dynamic supply chain while scaling our business in ways that, frankly, we'd never really even imagined that we would need to. All of that has provided a lot of lessons, and truthfully, I think it's going to take us a long time to learn all of those lessons. I think we're still in the moment, in part because of a surge that has happened over this past fall, and I think we feel like we're in it again.

In terms of need, we had seen this dramatic increase in the spring. Things began to level off over the summer, began to decline a little bit in September—largely because families had children returning to school, where they could get school-based meal program access—but now all of a sudden it has increased again, and it feels very much like it did in the early days of the pandemic.

Roberto Uchoa: So if we look into 2021, what do you think will be some of the challenges that you'll have to face with your organization, and on the flip side, some of the opportunities that '21 might bring?

Kate Maehr: I think we have a number of challenges: first and foremost, keeping our teams safe, keeping our partners safe, keeping the men, women, and children we serve safe—every day, just making sure that we have enough protective gear, that we are adhering to all of the best standards for social distancing. That in and of itself presents a set of challenges.

We have had periods throughout the pandemic when, because of contact tracing, members of our team have had to go into quarantine, which means we have fewer truck drivers, which means we've got members who are doubling up. Just operating in this environment is complicated.

Beyond that, we know that there are going to continue to be record numbers of people who need us. Many of the folks turning to us are turning to us for the very first time in their lives, and that creates a set of challenges. They don't know how to navigate the social safety net. They're not certain where to go for assistance. Trying to connect them with programs and help them as they navigate is another set of challenges.

And then I would say that the continued dynamic quality of the supply chain has me concerned. We are certainly seeing that it continues to be difficult at times to access enough food, and also to source food. We are paying more than we paid a year ago for food, and I worry that we are going to have challenges sourcing enough—challenges with both donated food and food purchased at a cost that we can afford for the community that we need.

Which leads me to the opportunity. Frankly, I think the biggest opportunity in this work is to have a robust public response. In particular, when we think about hunger, having SNAP or the food stamp program step in and provide support for people at this time of need, that's the biggest opportunity in front of us. Because those dollars can not only get to people in need in a very efficient, targeted way, but there's also a stimulus impact. Those dollars would immediately be spent in grocery stores, in communities that frankly need the dollars. So I think there's a real opportunity for us as a country to invest in that program.

Roberto Uchoa: Kate, when we think about the private sector or private companies, and public companies, how could these organizations partner with you and your team?

Kate Maehr: There are many ways. First and foremost—and at this time of year in particular— we need support. We need financial support. If this were any other year I would say do a food drive, have a barrel in your office building, but of course that's a challenge. Instead we are actually asking people to consider doing virtual food drives, so that dollars can be contributed to the Food Depository that makes it possible for us to go out and purchase the food that we need for our neighbors.

We also need volunteers, and that's been one of the really bright spots in this story. Early on in the pandemic we figured out a way to re-engineer our entire volunteer program (Roberto, I know you've been down there many times over the last nine months) so that we can safely welcome volunteers into our building. And we still have a need, because what volunteers are working on are emergency food boxes that flow out every day across the community, so there's a huge need for volunteers.

I would also say that there is the need for conversation, for companies and for individuals to learn more about the issue and educate themselves on what we can do. When we think about the opportunity, whether it's for a stronger safety net like the SNAP program or even coming together and identifying how we as a community can respond to the needs of our neighbors, it starts with a conversation. It starts with the recognition that we have neighbors who are struggling, and I think there is an opportunity for us to look at our community and decide how we are going to come together and make a stronger, better, healthier Chicago.

Roberto Uchoa: That is terrific. And maybe—in the spirit of the holidays on which we are about to embark—if there is one or even two things that you could change, that would improve or fix the current system that addresses food security, what would that wish be?

Kate Maehr: My wish, it's a big one; my wish has two parts. I wish that we could come together and put aside any animosity that we might feel towards people in need and recognize that there are people who are having to turn to food pantries. They don't choose to do this. This isn't a place that they want to be in their life. And, in fact, when they go to that food pantry, I think it's the bravest act that they're taking. Parents who choose to stand in line on a cold winter day in Chicago so that their children can have food to eat, that is heroic.

But rather than questioning why people might need food or the choices that they have made to get into that set of circumstances where they need assistance, I wish we were able to come together and to advocate for a safety net that can really support us when we need it. This is not a problem that charity can solve alone. We need strong public programs like the SNAP program, like school-based breakfast and lunch programs, like programs that serve people with disabilities and older adults.

We are a country that ... I think it's the greatest country in the world. And at this time of year, as we reflect on our own gratitude, I think we

should also recognize that this is a country where no one should go hungry. In order for that to happen, we have to come together and advocate for a world that is truly better for all.

Roberto Uchoa: Well, thank you so much, Kate, well said words. And any final thoughts?

Kate Maehr: I want to give a lot of gratitude to the McKinsey team, who have been partners with the Food Depository and the Feeding America Network for quite a while. And one of the truths of this year is that there have been so many moments when we felt—like everybody— overwhelmed and unsure of what to do next.

But somehow when you're in that moment and a partner reaches out and asks, "How can we help? How can we problem-solve with you? How can we be part of a solution?," that's the phone call that makes all the difference. It makes it possible for us to rise up, to know that we're not alone, and to get out there and make sure that our neighbors have food. So on behalf of this entire community, our partners, and most importantly the people we serve, thank you.

Kate Maehr is the executive director and CEO of the Greater Chicago Food Depository. **Roberto Uchoa** is a senior partner in McKinsey's Chicago office.

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