

OPINION

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An emergency COVID-19 fund in Delco fights to feed the newly needy in the 'burbs | Maria Panaritis

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There's a perception problem about the suburbs. As though it is a Land of Plenty. Where bum luck happens only on Netflix in the living room of a detached house with a fenced-in yard.

But coronavirus economic carnage is piling up beyond Philadelphia proper. Now would be a good time to ditch the stereotype of suburban largesse and make sure our charitable donations match the reality of the need that surrounds us.

The suburbs need your help. Now. Especially the one many of us know best as "Delco." Delaware County is the poorest of the four counties that border Philadelphia, one of the nation's most populous cities. One in 10 people were in poverty in Delco *before* the recent calamitous shutdown of economic activity in our region due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people don't know this.

With the county as home to many service-sector workers who've lost Philadelphia jobs due to the pandemic, the situation has only become worse, it seems. Intense efforts are underway to raise money for people facing catastrophe.



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Layla de Luria (right) of Centro de Apoyo Comunitario and volunteer Assunta Becker pack food-donation boxes for needy Delaware County families.

If only raising the money, however, were easier than it's shaping up to be. Food banks from Chester to Upper Darby are dealing with growing lines filled with faces they've never before seen. The county itself, with its relatively meager commercial tax base, had to [furlough](#) 400 government workers a few weeks ago due to the pandemic.

Charity is essential right now. But the perception that donors have — and the ways they typically spend their charity — often means that this county of 567,000 is not among the first, or the last, to get charitable checks.

“I think people who are comfortable have no idea how much poverty there is in the county and how many people there are who literally do not have a dime in savings and not through any fault of their own. They may be working a minimum-wage job. Minimum wage is not even \$10 an hour in Pennsylvania,” said Frances Sheehan, who as president of the three-year-old Foundation for Delaware County has established a [Delaware County COVID-19 Response Fund](#) to help with immediate food aid in recent weeks.

“I think there are some really frightened people who do not know if they're going to make it through the next month,” she said.

The emergency fund has raised more than \$500,000 in less than two months. Its goal is to turn that money around quickly into grants that get put to use on the ground immediately.



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A truck is loaded with boxes of food for families in need in Delaware County, where the coronavirus has left immigrant families and those of other service-sector workers in Philadelphia desperate in the wake of the economic shutdown.

it's a nice sum, but not when you consider the need. Tens of thousands of Delco residents were in poverty on a so-called "good" day — before the pandemic shutdown that has caused potentially Great Depression levels of unemployment and economic catastrophe. Institutional donors, including even some businesses, tend to overlook the county when writing checks. They do not quite grasp the scope of need if it bleeds beyond Philadelphia's or their own small town's borders.

"Historically, people in Delaware County have either given hyper-locally to their local fire company or their library, or there are affluent communities [such as Swarthmore] that are very generous in Chester," Sheehan said. "There are many people in Delco who may give to Philadelphia or to their church or their alma mater. But they don't realize the incredible opportunity to make a difference in their own county."

COVID fallout has been intense in the city of Chester and neighboring towns along the river, and communities closer to West Philadelphia, where people who held janitorial and restaurant jobs in Center City are now living, with no unemployment checks, in small houses or apartments at the end of the Market-Frankford Elevated line in Upper Darby. "We're struggling in Delaware County," said social worker Layla de Luria, whose volunteer-led group in Upper Darby has seen a surge in families needing food.

She runs Centro de Apoyo Comunitario. A few days ago, the group received a Delco COVID emergency fund grant to expand on a food bank de Luria had already begun for families whose breadwinners have lost jobs in Philadelphia's service economy.

On Tuesday, de Luria bought groceries, hauled them to her home in Wynnewood, Montgomery County, packed them into boxes in her garage, and set to deliver them one town, and county, over in Upper Darby.

De Luria was pleased to hear I was writing about the plight of the needy — and the foundations who need money — in Delco. The reason: There is frustration in the suburbs over the fact that charitable givers and media organizations tend to overlook the degree of economic suffering there.

“Just getting the attention of donors is hard,” de Luria said. In Delaware County, 10% of 567,000 residents are in poverty. In Philadelphia, a quarter of its 1.6 million residents are. In Montgomery County, 6% of its 830,000 are impoverished.



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Food donation boxes being prepared for needy Delaware County families.

Which means the time is now to [donate to the Delco fund](#).

“There are a lot of desperate people out there,” Sheehan said.

Out there in suburbia. Of all places. Yes.



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