

THE COOP'S NEW ORIENTATION PROCESS

December 6, 2022



By Frank Haberle

The NEW New-Member Orientation: Something Lost, Something Gained

Before COVID, the Coop had a system for acculturating new members: a two-hour, in-person orientation meeting and a basement-to-attic guided tour of the facility. Organized and led by a committed Orientation Committee of approximately 20 seasoned members, the orientations often welcomed anywhere from 20 to 50 new members and included a PowerPoint presentation, Q&A and opportunities for incoming members to learn about the structure and the culture of the Coop from long-standing members.

The Coop has changed in many ways since the COVID crisis first swept through Brooklyn and across the globe in March 2020, and the orientation requirements have necessarily changed as well. Currently, the in-person orientations are a thing of the past. After a pause on bringing in new members, the Coop had to develop an orientation system that is largely self-regulated and begins online. New members read a summary of general expectations about work slots, shopping practices, household requirements, pricing and ways to become involved. They watch a three-minute video and agree to sign a document covering the essential tenets of Coop membership. New members then make an appointment to come to the Coop office, fill out an application and get a Member Services tutorial; they can begin shopping the next day.



New members come into the office, fill out an application, sign up for a shift and they can begin shopping the next day.

Like all facets of Coop membership, something has been gained—a more streamlined system for orientation and entry that, on paper and online, certainly covers the expect-

tations and considerations of membership. Because we are still facing a public health crisis, waiving the requirement to sit in a conference room with 30-plus people for two hours is certainly safer—and finding a conference room in the newly-reconfigured upstairs offices of the Coop is, in itself, a challenge.

But has something also been lost, notably in terms of the human interaction and direct connection with members, in this new orientation system?

TEN YEARS AGO WE USED TO PACK 50 PEOPLE IN THE UPSTAIRS CONFERENCE ROOM; THEN WE LIMITED THEM TO ABOUT 20 TO CONTROL THE SIZE OF THE COOP.

MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR KAREN MANCUSO

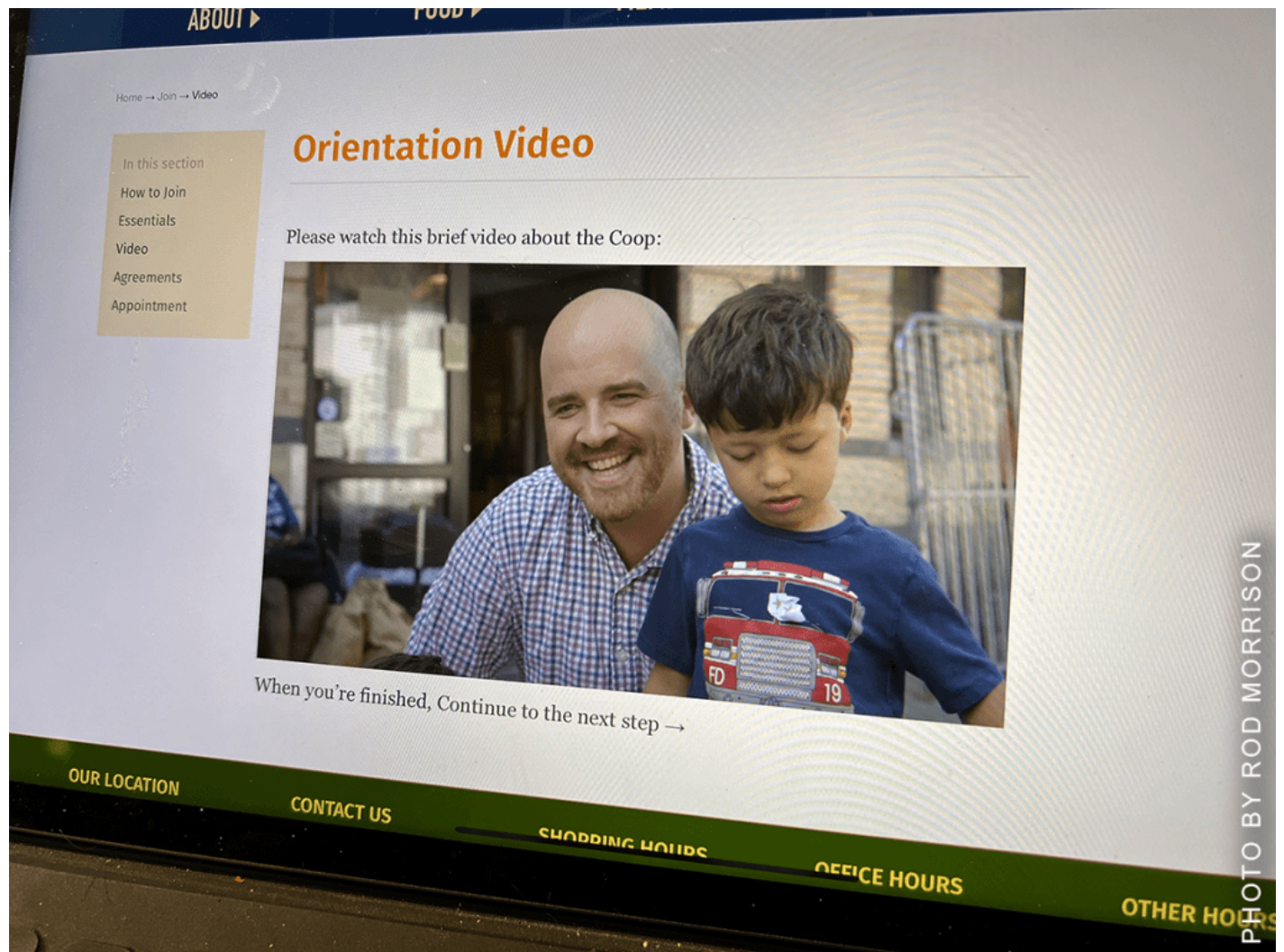
Before the Storm: The Orientation Sessions

“From the staff perspective, a lot of things have shifted since the pandemic started,” Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso, who was the staff liaison to the Orientation Committee, said recently. Before the pandemic, Mancuso remembers that orientation sessions were extraordinary because of the commitment and experience of the 20 squad members who led the sessions. “Ten years ago we used to pack 50 people in the upstairs conference room; then we limited them to about 20 to control the size of the Coop. The people presenting led discussion and used a PowerPoint, not just to cover rules and requirements, but also to explain the Coop’s culture, how members can be involved in the Coop as owners, how they can participate in general meetings, how they can learn from the *Gazette*.”

“Members definitely got more out of this exchange,” Mancuso added. “In 90 minutes some people might have zoned out, but they still got the general impression, the tone of Coop membership. They then got to tour the basement and the shopping floor. This

in-person orientation practice was a casualty of COVID. When we were ready to admit new members again after a year or so, we had already lost over 5,000 members in that time frame. The current system [which has operated for roughly one year] was set up as an interim orientation system.”

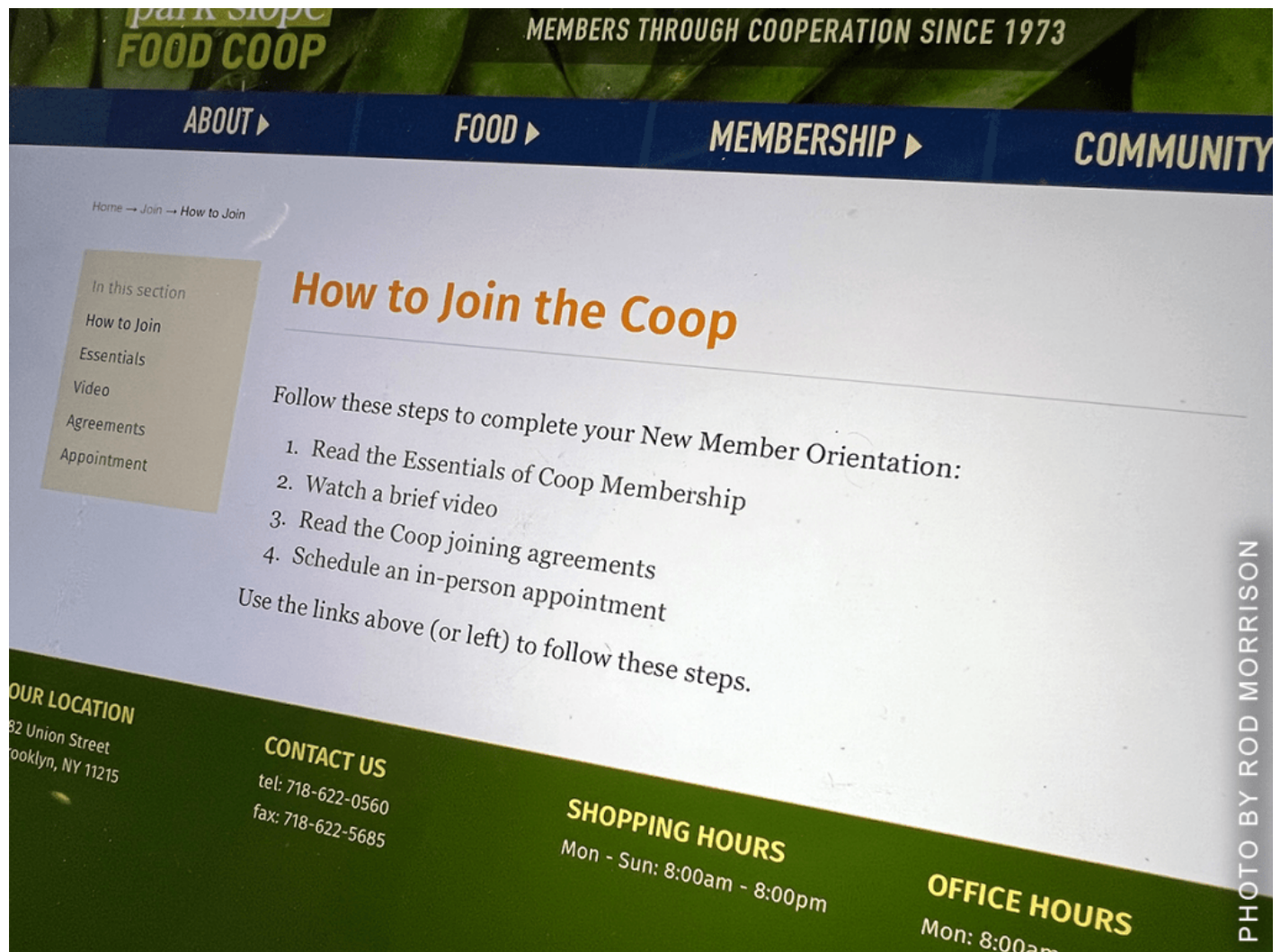
The New Orientation System



The Coop's amazing on-line system keeps new member sign-ups running smoothly. There's even a video to watch.

Mancuso believes that the Coop needs to move back toward some sort of in-person orientation process, even if by Zoom. “Today you hit the ‘join’ button on the website, and you read a summary of how the Coop works. Then you make an appointment to come to the office and enroll. You sit down with an office worker and fill out the appli-

cation. They show you how to sign up for shifts in Member Services and then they take your picture. The whole thing takes 15 to 20 minutes.”



The online application to become a new member is simple, you hit the ‘join’ button and read a summary on how the Coop works.

Mancuso has observed that some of the people who come into the office don’t open the video or read the website very closely. “We rely on people to read what we wrote. The problem is that the new members are not always really getting it. They don’t understand how to participate in a General Meeting, or they don’t understand how to shop, or they don’t see the difference between the regular line and the express line. They don’t understand or are surprised by the first-time member payments when they check out, or they get suspended and don’t understand how or why.”



We want new members to be excited, feel engaged and buy into the Coop, says Coop Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso.

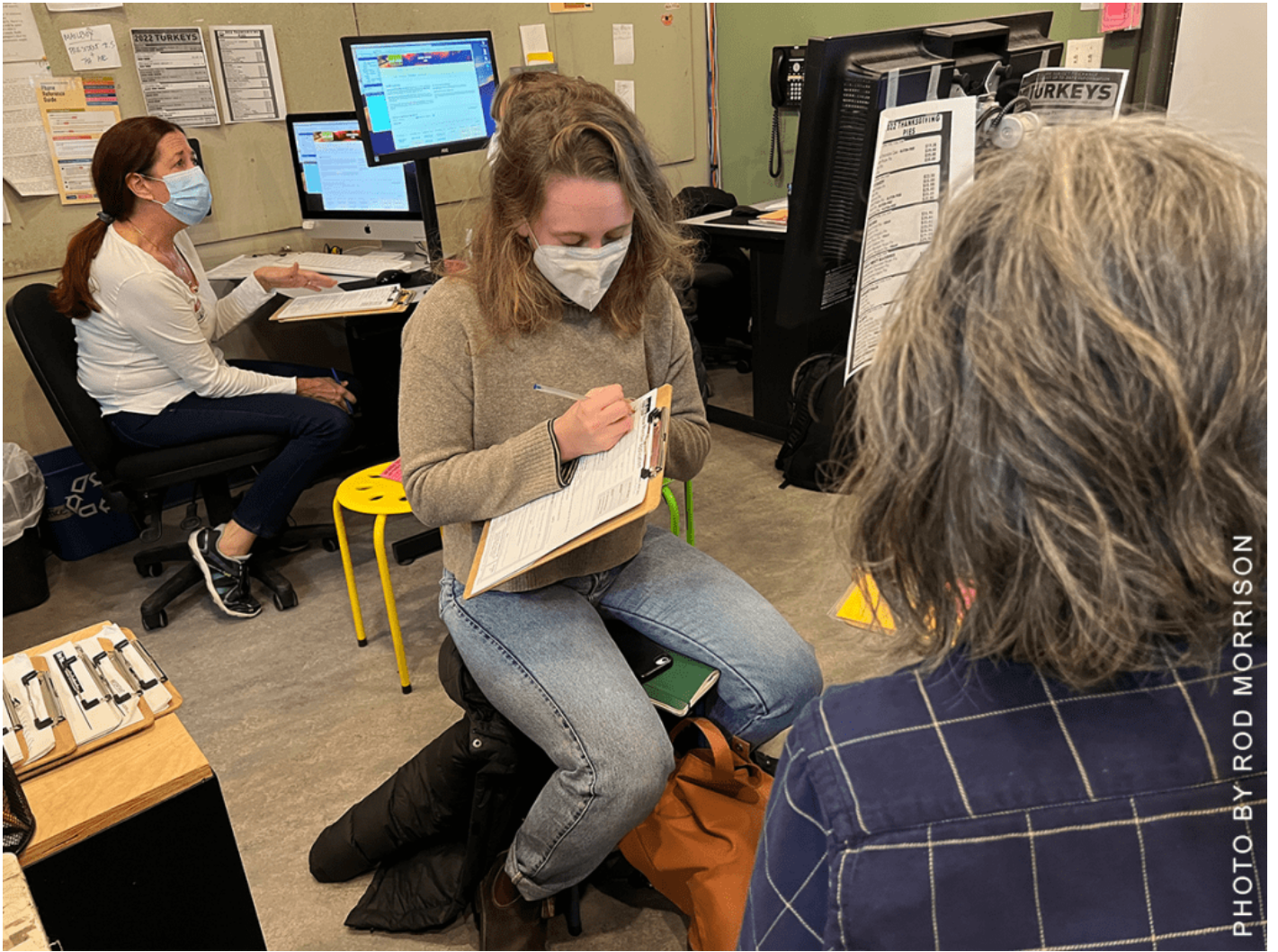
“We’re just not able to spend enough time with [new members] to help them understand the ins and outs when they come in to enroll,” Mancuso added. “We all have a big stake in their success—older Coop members, the staff, the Coop itself. Currently, we don’t refer to the process as orientation; we refer to it as ‘new member enrollment.’ But bringing back orientation is definitely on our agenda. Space is an issue, with the upstairs meeting rooms pressed into service for packaging and the return of child-care. The current system is an interim system; we hope to bring a full orientation system back into place.”



Member-worker Cathy Elton with new member Arne Zeidler reviewing potential Coop squad work assignments.

Looking Forward

Some of the post-COVID changes have been very beneficial. “The IT work has been amazing—we have a great online system that has everything running smoothly.” Mancuso also cites the gradual return of processes that can help support members’ sense of ownership and connectivity. “We’ve returned to recurring squads. And childcare will be back in 2023.” As new systems blend with traditional ways that the Coop has relied on for decades, there is an opportunity to re-introduce orientation practices that support new members as they join the Coop community. “We want them to be excited when they join the Coop, to feel engaged, to feel like they are a part of something,” Mancuso says. “We want them to buy into the Coop.”



Lucy Haskell seen signing up for membership overseen by member-worker, Dulcy Israel.

Frank Haberle has been a Coop member for nearly 30 years. He works for New Settlement in the Bronx and is the author of the novel Shufflers.