FIVE YEARS ON: HOW COVID TRANSFORMED THE COOP

May 13, 2025



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By Susannah Jacob

It’s been half a decade since the Covid-19 pandemic shut down New York City and sent the world—and the Coop—off its axis. On March 23, 2020, for the first time in its history, the Coop suspended its member-labor work requirement. But the staff still had to find a way to keep the doors open—selling affordable and fresh food had hardly ever been so important.

The *Gazette* spoke with staff and members who steered the Coop through that trying

and fearful era, and who have shepherded it into recent times. They spoke of their exhaustion, learning the extent of their own mettle and strength and also their powers of imagination and innovation.

When Covid struck, General Coordinator Ann Herpel had been at the Coop for two decades, and on staff since April 2002. Herpel says her immediate memory of March 2020 is of a great deal of confusion and a lack of direction. “We were this retail operation that people needed to get food from,” Herpel says.

During one week in March, the Coop sold more food than it did any week before—or since. But when city and state regulations limited in-person work to essential workers, Herpel says, “we took that to mean we could not ask people who were not paid employees to work.” The staff had to find a way to stay open after the suspension of member labor. They tackled a deluge of problems, one at a time: hiring and on-boarding part-time and full-time workers to run check-out lines and do other jobs historically worked by members, setting the new occupancy limit to 30 shoppers at a time, building plexiglass barriers at checkout stations, enforcing a mask mandate, social distancing and cleaning protocols, providing food and space for workers who needed to eat lunch while clocking long shifts and, of course, following the news.



Pandemic checkout worker behind plexiglass

“The phones rang off the hook, we worked 16-hour days, and our employees were afraid to come to work,” Herpel says. Ultimately, the Coop hired and onboarded 130 temporary and paid employees. “We had people who thought they could do this and quit after the first day—they couldn’t handle the stress,” Herpel says. What carried them through, though, was the knowledge that “in such a terrifying time for every-

one, this is where members wanted to come. We knew there were members who really rely on us, who had trust in us."

Herpel says that she learned that "I and a bunch of other people were a lot more resilient than I thought, that we could be calm in the face of a terrifying situation…there was a sense of working together to solve problems because the circumstances were forced upon us…and we did it."

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> *GENERAL COORDINATOR ANN HERPEL*

Herpel points to other silver linings that emerged as a result of the pandemic. There was the birth of Member Services—an online system that members found more helpful to manage their memberships than anything on offer in pre-Covid times.

And while the fear of contracting illness was profound, the staff of the Coop "did not live a life of isolation," Herpel recalls. "We had each other. Not a lot of other people had that."



During Covid the produce aisle had one-way entry.

Membership Coordinator Mae Frankeberger was a working member who joined the staff during the pandemic shutdown as a temporary pandemic worker—and ended up joining the staff two years later.

She became a member of the Coop originally in January 2018, in search of a sense of community. Frankeberger remembers the weeks leading up to the shutdown, “people were frantically calling to try and go on leave, people were leaving town because they were scared.” Working as a member in the office, she filled out their paperwork.

In March 2020, she saw a job posting for temporary workers on the Coop’s Instagram, and applied to work checkout. “I needed the social interaction at that point,” she says. She remembers a frequent shopper who she checked out and chatted with often. Later, after the pandemic, the pair ran into each other at the Coop, and the mem-

ber thanked Frankeberger for their chats when she interacted with few people outside her household. “You saved me in the pandemic,” Frankeberger remembers.

Frankeberger worked checkout during lockdown for a little over a year. She felt a sense of safety working at the Coop because of the many precautions undertaken, as a well of a sense camaraderie. “I understood that people in the same job as me were being treated much more poorly in other stores, and I appreciated the care the Coop staff took.”

“We all started off at $15 an hour—a few of us sought higher wages given the risk. It was hard given the [financial] constraints on the Coop, but it was also hard on us, some of us worked 30 hours or more a week.” She was also grateful to qualify for an early Covid-19 vaccine as a frontline worker.

Like Herpel, Frankeberger sees the rollout of Member Services necessitated by lockdown as a silver lining. That said, she does miss the sense of community she experienced working a regular shift.

When she walks into the Coop during mandatory mask days, “I definitely get some not-fun flashbacks.”

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> *MEMBER RIMMA ASHKINADZE*

Rimma Ashkinadze has been a Coop member for 25 years. She shopped at the Coop throughout, including during lockdown. “It was never a decision,” she says. She lives three blocks away from the Coop, and “the Coop is the best and closest place for me. It’s always been my happy place,” she says.

Her Covid memories are of waiting to shop in a line that stretched around the block, checking Instagram to learn if the line was long or short, and plotting her grocery list according to a map of the Coop's aisles. "We needed to shop quickly and get out of there, so my partner and I split up the store and met when we were done—for a long time, I never saw the other aisles. To this day we split the labor the same way."

Like Frankeberger, Ashkinadze is wistful for her squad before Covid. "I used to be a squad leader for 20 years in receiving, the community of being on a squad together doesn't exist anymore," she says, "even if you make a friend you may never see them again." What she doesn't miss, she says, "is people texting me one hour after the shift ended and I am already home to ask, "Hey, can you only give me one make-up?"

Susannah Jacob is a history PhD student. She takes pride in her proficient operation of the slotted, plastic bag-taper machine in the bulk department.