

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: COOP MEMBERS SUPPORT SNAP RECIPIENTS DURING SHUTDOWN

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PHOTO BY KATE PREVITE

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By Lora Kelley

On November 1, the Park Slope Food Coop posted on Instagram requesting donations to support members affected by disruptions to SNAP benefits. Within a week, members had given more than \$20,000.

The PSFC SNAP Assistance Fund was organized to provide relief to those who rely on benefits from SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, for their Coop shopping. During the 43-day shutdown of the federal government, which began on October 1, the nation's largest anti-hunger initiative was mired in uncertainty and legal

challenges that jeopardized people’s ability to access groceries. While officials, lawyers and administrators were scrambling to figure out what was happening, and whether eligible recipients could continue getting benefits, people needed to eat. About one in eight Americans, or 42 million people, rely on SNAP benefits—that includes some 3 million people in New York state.



PHOTO BY KATE PREVITE

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More than \$5,000 was distributed to Coop members registered for SNAP benefits in the first week after the fundraiser went live, General Manager Joe Szladek said in an interview, and about half of the fund was used overall. Now that the shutdown has ended and SNAP benefits have resumed, excess donations will be diverted to CHIPS (Community Help in Park Slope).



Now that the shutdown has ended and SNAP benefits are resuming, excess donations will be diverted to CHiPS (Community Help in Park Slope).

As it became clear that SNAP would be interrupted, Coop staff began discussing what to do, Szladek said. He noted that there was a lot of collective energy, both among Park Slope Food Coop members and the broader national coop community, to find ways to help people who rely on these benefits. (The United States Department of Agriculture forbade stores from offering discounts to SNAP recipients.)

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GENERAL MANAGER JOE SZLADEK

Some of the staff's ideas included setting up a food pantry at the Coop, or asking members to purchase items to donate to food kitchens. The idea of creating a member-driven fund would be more complicated than those actions—but setting up such a fund seemed like the best way to “honor the dignity of those losing benefits,” allowing them to keep shopping as usual, Szladek said. So the team moved forward with the fundraiser.

“Members stepped up,” Szladek said. “There was an outpouring of support for each other and for the community.” In fact, within 48 hours, more than \$10,000 in donations had come in. The fundraiser was advertised through a single Instagram post and through announcements over the intercom in the Coop. The fundraiser didn't have a hard number goal, Szladek noted, but the aim was to cover average weekly spending for about a month for members who use SNAP at the Coop.

Many members were enthusiastic about the initiative. Rita Wenxin Wang, a member since 2021 who has interacted with SNAP recipients on their checkout shift, said that, as someone “deeply interested in the redistribution of wealth,” they were “glad that the massive Coop community could come together to support members.” Bryony Romer, a member of 30 years who saw the announcement about the fundraiser on Instagram, said that she “was excited to see the Coop leading to mobilize the vast resources in our community to help those at risk of starving.” She added that she loves the Coop because it is a “people-organized place where we all pitch in to make something good happen.”

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Once the fund started coming in, Szladek explained, the next step was to alert eligi-

ble members. Members of the Coop's information technology team wrote an email to about 450 people, letting them know that this was happening, and what amount they were eligible for. Eligibility was based on past SNAP usage at the Coop, and the amount of support available per member was determined based on that data. In other words, the Coop took the average amount a member spent weekly (based on sales data from prior weeks) and gave eligible members that weekly amount. Members were advised to shop normally, check out, and then suspend their receipt. Then, they could bring the receipt to a staff member, who attached a ticket, and the bookkeepers took care of things from there.



Members eligible for the PSFC SNAP Assistance Fund were advised to shop normally at the Coop during the lapse in SNAP funding due to the government shutdown. This fundraiser was the first of its kind for the Coop, Szladek said, as it "was driven by a gap in members' ability to purchase food." He added that, if in the future, another emergency like this arises, "this mechanism is there."



Szladek noted the Coop has long supported other efforts to keep participation accessible and help feed neighbors facing food insecurity. Each week, about 100 Coop members volunteer with CHiPS, representing 5 percent of overall member labor. Those efforts amount to about 14,000 total hours each year, he added. Szladek encouraged members to keep volunteering at and donating to CHiPS.

“It’s heartening to be part of a community where members will readily help members,” Szladek reflected.

Lora Kelley is a freelance writer in Brooklyn.