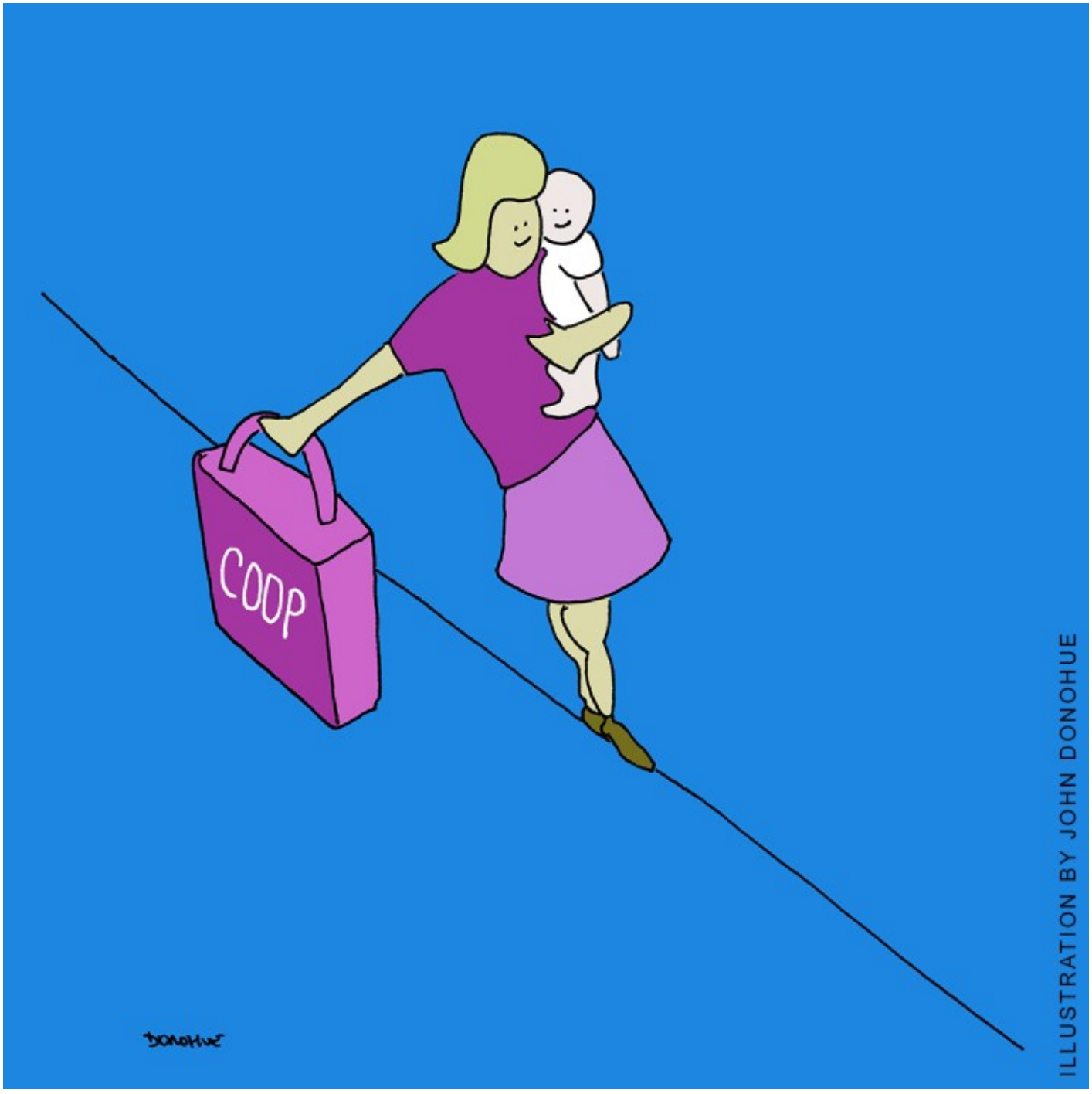
SINGLE MOMS STRUGGLING TO FIND COOP SHIFTS

May 31, 2022



BY HAYLEY GORENBERG

The high-wire act of snagging and balancing Coop work shifts, while being a single parent of young children—especially in an era when the Coop lacks childcare—took center ring in the Coop Confidential Facebook group in recent weeks, with many sin-

gle mothers venting their frustration about whether or not they are truly welcome at the store.

WORKING SHIFTS

In April, changes in work shifts extended work cycles, and adjusted the release of new shift opportunities, so they trickle out more steadily over time—rather than flooding online at odd hours, and quickly getting scooped up. The Coop also considered the return of reliably recurring shifts in July. But these improvements still left mothers of young children jockeying for swaps through flurries of social media posts, and wishing for both structured flexibility to swap shifts, and childcare coverage at the Coop. Some said they had felt unwelcome at the Coop from the start.

“I don’t mind working at all, but it’s a little bit complicated, and they’re not flexible,” said Alla Tice, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union who joined the Coop in 2018, motivated in large part by stellar tomatoes. “‘Wonderful tomatoes!’ That’s what everyone said at orientation. The food is amazing. The choice is amazing. Prices are good. It’s three small blocks away, my local supermarket.”

Tice, a self-described “single mother by choice” of two children, now four and almost eight years old, said she was dismayed to be met with suspicion about her household from the outset. When she first arrived at the Coop and explained that she was the only adult in a household with two children, she said the response was incredulous, “Yeah. Right.” She felt she was being tacitly accused of lying.

> THE COOP SHOULD INSTITUTE A “GRACE PERIOD,” TO ALLOW SINGLE PARENTS WHO LACK ROUTINE CHILD CARE TO REMAIN MEMBERS.
>
> *—KIKI RAKOWSKY, COOP MEMBER*

She forged ahead anyway, and did appreciate the Coop's parental leave policy, applied when her younger child was born. After her leave, she got some help from her mother, or from friends on occasion, and successfully worked checkout for almost a year, before COVID-19 put member work on hiatus. But when member work resumed, with the childcare room shut down indefinitely, and other care options constrained by COVID risks, she started to struggle with meeting shift requirements. She stopped by the Coop office to try and work out a solution—and described speaking with an individual in the office—who, she said, told her, "Maybe the Coop is not for you."



Shopping with a baby in a stroller along the produce section of the Coop.

BANKING SHIFTS

Tice scrambled to bank shifts for a full week when she had childcare in early 2022. She said she worked so steadily that a staff member asked whether she had joined as a paid employee. But with her banked shifts running out, Tice said she checks "al-

most every day” for shifts she can manage—and she’s having a hard time finding them. She rhapsodizes about the childcare room: “My daughter loved it! They got bagels. They played. I know my youngest now, she would appreciate it.” However, she vacillated in her feelings about a childcare space during the era of COVID. “I’m not sure how I would feel about bringing back childcare—but I would still say it would be really nice if childcare were available. It would be helpful.”

> I DON’T MIND WORKING AT ALL, BUT IT’S A LITTLE BIT COMPLICATED, AND THEY’RE NOT FLEXIBLE.
>
> *—ALLA TICE, COOP MEMBER*

Ultimately, she wondered about the possibility of a documented proof of need for excuse from work during a period of time, comparing the situation to excusing jurors who are primary caretakers of young children. “I don’t want to sound lazy,” she hurried to add. “I don’t want to sound like I want to avoid work.”

LOOKING FOR A SHIFT



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

Coop member and single mother Kiki Rakowsky, a Coop Confidential member, also advocated for lessened shift requirements with documented proof of need—perhaps a tax return excerpt showing that a parent is “head of household” with young dependents. Rakowsky likened searching for shifts that worked in her schedule to buying choice concert tickets the moment they are released. She said fellow Coop members told her to “wake up early, 4 or 4:30,” to find “plenty of slots.”

Rakowsky, a funeral director, said, “I don’t have the privilege of knowing when I’m going to be at work. Let’s say I schedule a shift four weeks in advance—and someone dies?” In the absence of a formal shift-swapping procedure, even the revisions to the work slot system fall short of addressing her need for flexibility. “It’s almost like the Coop has turned into ‘Lord of the Flies,’” she exclaimed. “Kill or be killed there! Eat or be eaten! Everyone’s stretched really thin.”

A Coop member for more than a decade, Rakowsky brought her now-seven-year-old to the Coop in a baby carrier, and nursed him during her checkout shift, until he was old enough to go to Coop childcare.

ON LEAVE

Part of the “sandwich generation,” Rakowsky now also takes care of her father—and she is on leave until June for that reason. She said she’s not sure how she will maintain her membership after her leave ends—but she remains convinced the Coop can solve the problem.



Pushing a baby in a stroller along the busy bulk section of the Coop.

“I think it’s an amazing institution,” she said. “I think it’s a great place with great people, and the model has worked for so long and so many.” She pointed out that the pandemic has laid bare the deficits in many systems, including, but not limited to, PS-FC. “It’s nothing against the Coop,” she said. “I sing the praises of the Coop! The Coop should be modeling how to shop for all of its members. If we had elderly shopping on Thursday mornings, why haven’t we solved for single parents? You can’t pick and choose which marginalized community to solve for. When I hear that people can no longer shop at the Coop because of their single-parent status, I’m with you!” she said. “We have to have the intellectual wherewithal to come up with a solution.” Until then, she suggested the Coop should institute a “grace period,” to allow single parents who lack routine child care to remain members. For now, she said, “I’m just tired!”

COOP CHILDCARE ON HOLD



The Coop bulk room.

PSFC Membership Coordinator Matt Hoagland, on staff for more than 17 years, acknowledged childcare at the Coop was on hold “indefinitely”—because of COVID concerns, but also because using the space for bulk processing equipment has radically improved packaging bulk items, to the point where what was once a week’s worth of work can be accomplished in a day. That capacity is all the more critical when COVID safety measures necessitate moving shoppers efficiently through the high-volume bulk aisle, “traditionally one of the worst aisles for traffic.”

Hoagland deemed creating a system for excusing single parents of young children from work slots “above pay grade” for his position—meaning it would require a rule change. Noting that he grew up in a household headed by his single mother, he asked, “How much can we get into the management of people’s lives? It’s hard, and some of the answers don’t sound friendly at times.”

He also pointed out that even when childcare existed at the Coop, pre-pandemic, there was no guarantee it would be open or available at any particular time. “If we didn’t have workers, we didn’t have childcare, and that was what it was. So there were always limits on it.”

Hoagland expressed hope that newly available recurring shift options and improvements to online scheduling would help single parents, but acknowledged that there’s currently “no adequate answer.” He said, “We’re hoping people do the best they can. We’re making our way, trying to figure out what will work for most of our members—whether that’s single parents, hardcore planners, people who don’t plan very well, or people who only think of their status when they’re about to be suspended.”



Bags of produce being prepared for bulk sale.

Hayley Gorenberg is a journalist-turned-civil-rights-lawyer and Floridian--turned-Brooklynite.

FEBRUARY 22, 2022, GENERAL MEETING

May 31, 2022



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

February GM Covers Hearing Committee Election, Explores Child Care Proposal

By Frank Haberle

On February 22, approximately 110 PSFC members gathered by Zoom for the February General Meeting. The agenda items included voting for Hearing Administration Committee candidates, and discussion of a proposal to allow one member of a two--parent household to suspend membership in order to take care of children. Several brief committee and coordinator reports rounded out the events. With two items on the agenda, a smaller February crowd, and seasoned veterans running the event the meeting wrapped up in a crisp 90 minutes.

Electing New Hearing Committee Members

The first agenda item invited attending members to vote on two members who sought to join the Hearing Administration Committee (HAC). As explained by Committee member Dominique Bravo, the HAC acts as part of the PSFC's Disciplinary Committees, playing the role of organizing hearings by scheduling the events, calling in Coop members for hearings, and making sure that all procedures are followed. Bravo invited the two candidates, both 20-year members of the Coop, to speak about their qualifications. Only one of the two candidates, Israella Mayeri, was in attendance.

"I joined the Coop when I moved to this neighborhood," said Mayeri. "I joined the Coop because I liked the people and I liked the idea of joining a cooperative. I want to join this committee to make a greater contribution to the Coop."

Several attending members asked questions, including: "The Disciplinary Committee seems like such an important committee that does such confidential work. What is your experience and what makes you qualified to serve on this committee?" Bravo, who is a lawyer, clarified that there are a number of committees and that this committee does not manage the actual hearings. "I'm a retired lawyer," Mayeri added. "I'm very good with working with other people in a team. I want to contribute to this effort."

Allowing Parent of Young Children to Leave Membership

The second agenda item was a discussion item that allows one member of a two-adult household with a child or children under school age to leave membership. As presented by Ryan Snelson, a member of the Coop since December, the agenda item stated, "The Coop needs to better accommodate pandemic parents—allowing one partner to leave indefinitely so the other partner can care for their child or children under school age."

"Being a parent right now is extremely difficult," Snelson said, opening the discussion. "What makes it more difficult is being a parent and being able to meet shopping and work shift requirements. All we are asking for is that the Coop allow one parent to

take care of their child. I've brought this up a number of times with the membership office. I keep hearing, 'This is the way it has always been done.' I'm asking for one household partner to not have to work shifts."

Members weighed in on the proposal. One asked for clarification: "Would one member be exempt from the work requirement, or would they be placed on leave?" Another added, "We could make an effort to restart child care, which would be a better way. I am somewhat opposed to keeping people out because we need member labor but also because it's an important part of building the bond in the community." Questions were raised about how to accommodate single-parent households and people who are taking care of elders and sick family members. A recurring concern focused on drawing from the pool of member workers we need to keep the Coop fully functioning.

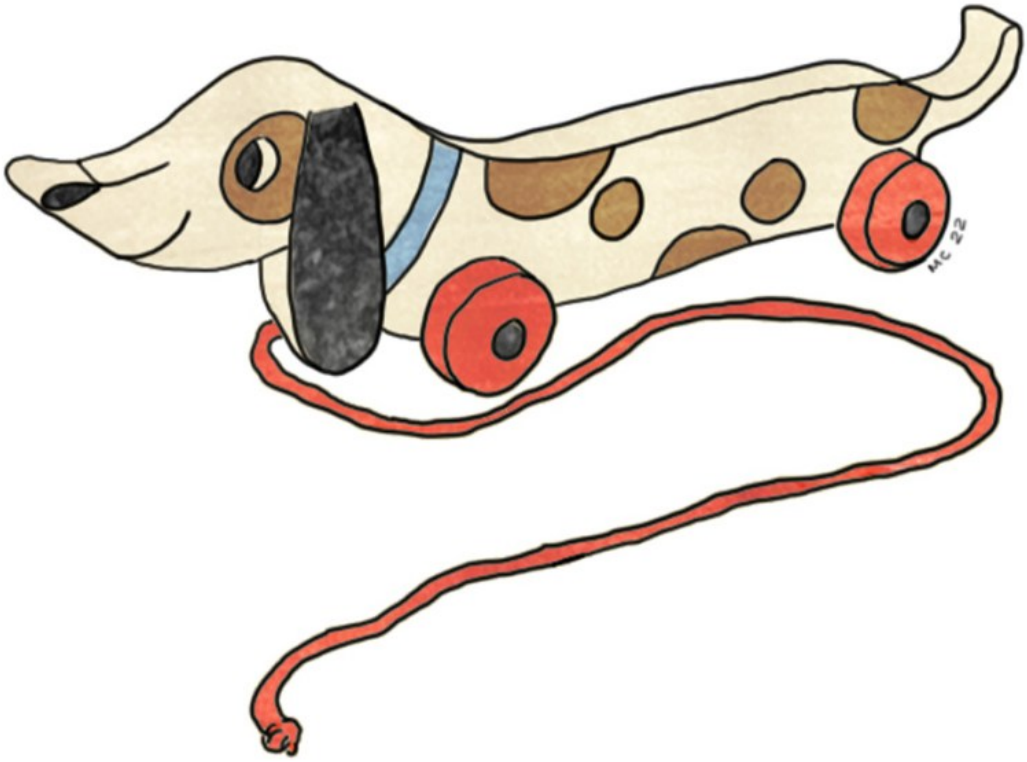


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

As one member noted, “As a new member you may not understand how the Coop works. When you say, ‘Half my household is not working,’ you’re doing something that is non-Coop. We need all our labor. There are other things we can be doing. If parents decide to opt out it undermines our model. Very few coops can do our work. Honestly, you just joined the Coop. Why do you want to mess with our model?”

“Nobody’s trying to undermine the Coop for this model,” Snelson responded. “I’m just

asking for us to look at this from the perspective of parents with young children. Do we want to look at the way we do business? Is the end game for the Coop to make more money, or increase labor?”

One member added, “I think child care is a really important part of the Coop. If people aren’t in favor of this proposal, then we should consider bringing back child care.” Another responded, “This may be part of a larger issue that concerns other members who are caring for people right now. I don’t see how taking back child care can be done right now. I think this is a non-issue.”

Snelson wrapped up the conversation by thanking everyone for their consideration. “I appreciate this, but I’m not asking for child care,” he concluded. “I’m asking for a policy where one parent can leave the Coop for child care responsibility. All your points about how the Coop worked in 1973 are good points, but this is not 1973.”

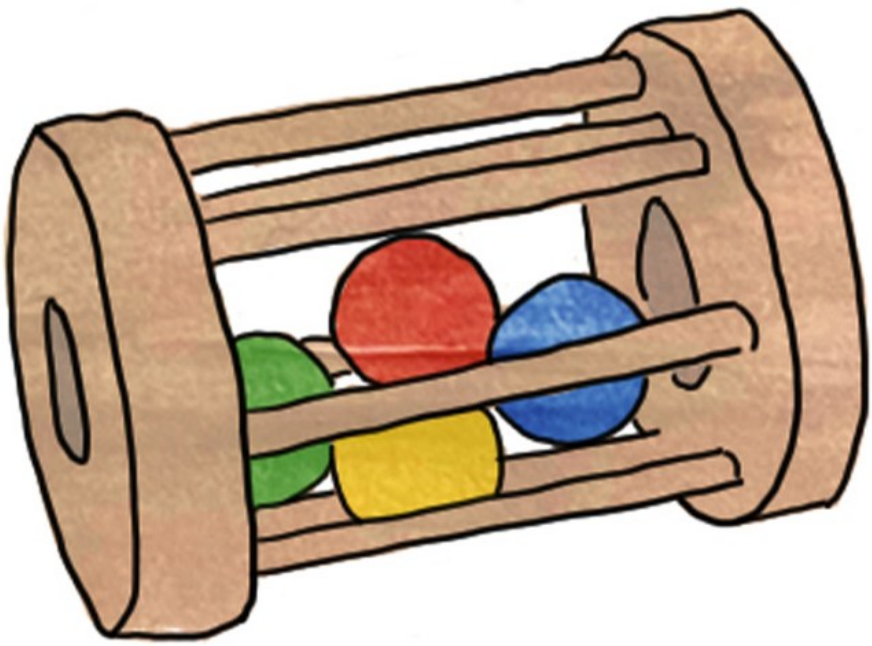


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

Committee and Coordinator Reports

Prior to the agenda items, there were a number of reports. Joe Holtz, General Manager, General Coordinator and Treasurer, reported on Coop finances, underscoring that there were indicators that the first four weeks of the 2022 fiscal year were off to a slow start, but that we are finally close to a cash flow break-even. “The advent of adding new members is important,” Holtz said. “We lost 4,500 to 5,000 members during

COVID. We are building back. We are now at about 13,000 and adding 100 or so a week." When asked what the optimal enrollment would be, Holtz said "we had 17,100 members when the pandemic started. Right now, we have a goal of 15,000. Let's get there first." Other members asked about how long price markups and fluctuating prices (which reflect price fluctuations and increases passed on by suppliers) would last. Holtz added that when member labor returns to 100% and the temporary worker system is sunsetted, the Coop will be able to look more closely at lowering prices.

General Coordinator Ann Herpel reported on the return of the member workforce and enrollment. "We are now reintroducing the food processing in the basement. If you are interested in olives and cheese work, you can find those shifts now. We have planned for the temp people to be here another two months." Regarding enrollment, Herpel stated that "we have new member enrollment sessions four times a week now with over 100 appointments to enroll. We have 1,000 new members since we started enrollment on December 5. Staff and members are reporting that the new members have been really enthusiastic." A very brief report on several international labor events in the news was reported by Bart DeCourcy of the International Trade Information Squad, rounding out the committee and Coordinator reports. In comments just before the reports, Imani Q'ryn, Board member, encouraged members to consider running for Board membership. "I've been on the Board 20 years. I want to encourage others to join the Board, especially people of color. If you love the Coop, help us protect the voice of the people."

MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR ANNETTE LASKARIS EMBARKS ON HER NEXT CHAPTER

May 31, 2022



Annette Laskaris, a Park Slope Food Coop employee since 2001, prepares for her retirement at the end of the month.

By Sara Ivry

When Membership Coordinator Annette Laskaris, 64, first joined the Food Coop, she was a mother of three small children, ages eight, six, and one. It was 1990. Laskaris had moved to the United States at 24, nearly a decade earlier, from her native Germany after meeting and marrying her husband, an American. Now ensconced in domestic life in the county of Kings, she was wowed by tales of robust food offerings to be had on nearby Union Street. A friend convinced her to give the Coop a try.

“I was a little wary in the beginning,” she said. “I knew I had to work and I had to work for my husband as well.”

Still, Laskaris joined. She dutifully put in her hours in child care, bringing her own charges along as she looked after the offspring of fellow members. The rest of the time, she looked after her kids back at home, taking breaks intermittently for projects

as a seamstress for hire. In 1991, she traded in child care for shifts in the office, and took a liking to it.

“I just didn’t want to be with that many kids all the time,” said Laskaris, reflecting recently on the arc of the three decades she wound up spending at the Coop. That journey is now drawing to a close, as Laskaris prepares to retire at the end of February.

“I was pretty good at the office work,” she said. Other Coop members and staff took notice. In 2001, Laskaris started a staff position as a membership coordinator working limited hours so she could be home; one of her children has a disability and Laskaris needed to be available.

“September 11 was my second day of work. That was very dramatic,” she said in her even-keeled delivery. ”I had just dropped off two of my kids at school, and a few hours later the school called and I had to pick them up.”

Yet as her children grew up, Laskaris’s schedule freed up and she started fitting a 40-hour work week into four long days. Her vantage point has given her a front-row seat from which to watch and be part of the Coop’s evolution, most of which she views as for the good.

“The space grew tremendously,” she said, recalling that the Coop occupied a single building when she first joined and members had to put in a cheese order with a monger at the start of their shop and pick it up on their way out. “The shopping hours grew, which was really great, because in the beginning, I think, it was only on Friday that they were open during the day. With the increase of space there was an increase of product. We voted that we can sell meat and we can sell beer. For me, it became a one-stop shop.”



Laskaris manually processing members' leave forms in 2008, before the Coop's transition to digital record keeping.

In the office, Laskaris was part of a team that oversaw epic change.

"From the beginning years, we had our little index cards and we'd write down every time someone did a shift and mark them present or absent," she said. It was arduous. "Then the conversion came and all the records went onto the computer. That saved us a lot of work."

Perhaps the biggest change for membership coordinators, she said, came during the pandemic when members gained the ability to coordinate their own shifts and fill them at irregular intervals.

Laskaris has also seen the Coop's ethos change over the course of her tenure.

"Not everybody knows everybody anymore, which was still alive until recently be-

cause you still had the squads where people would meet and you'd see the same people every four weeks," she said. "When the Coop was smaller, that was very important. Maybe the intimacy is gone, but you still have a lot of members who feel connected to the mission of the Coop–connected to the fact that they're working to help all members shop cheaper. We still have good prices. Even though we grew, that has not been lost."



We may not all know one another at the Coop these days, but we still try to help each other out.

Laskaris hopes that won't be lost in the future, either. There are things about the Coop she anticipates are permanently changed by the pandemic. She cannot imagine child care will return even in the event that the threat of Covid-19 is eradicated.

"Other grocery stores don't necessarily have child care and a lot of members that are now joining don't know about child care at the Coop so I'm not sure how necessary it is to bring it back," she said, while recognizing how useful she found it as a mother of

small children. “A lot of members are getting used to the fact that they can’t bring their kids so they’re finding ways around it.”

Laskaris’s retirement means the end of her partnership with the *Linewaiters’ Gazette* team. She took on that responsibility from a fellow membership coordinator who left the Coop eight years ago. At that time, *Gazette* production still took place on Coop computers.

“I used to come in on Sunday mornings, after a run around the park, which was fun because I got to know all the people who worked on the production teams,” she said. Helping on the *Gazette* wasn’t a natural fit for her. Laskaris doesn’t consider herself a particularly good writer or editor, but she is well versed in the Coop’s ins and outs, and therefore able to identify inaccuracies.

“We still print out the articles for the Coordinators to read, or let a staff person read the draft,” she said. “They give me their feedback and we relay the feedback to the editors . . . We still make sure the articles are factual. That hasn’t changed. I still go running on Sunday mornings, but I don’t stop by the Coop.”

With the imminent gift of free time, Laskaris plans on taking up sewing again, weaving, and spending time with her family. Her husband is retired and her grandchildren, a set of twins, are moving along with their parents back to the New York area from Ann Arbor.



Laskaris retires at the end of the month, but you might still find her on the shopping floor.

That doesn't mean she is taking a total break from the Coop, however.

"I'll miss the Coop if I can't work at all," she said, noting that she will do shifts for her eldest daughter, who is local. "I love the Coop, and I've loved my job as a membership coordinator. I really liked interacting with different sets of people every two hours and 45 minutes throughout the course of the day."

Sara Ivry is a long-time Coop member. She is a writer, editor and podcaster who lives in Clinton Hill.

SEPTEMBER 21 GENERAL MEETING ROUND UP

May 31, 2022



Above: General Meeting Zoom Participants

By Meredith Kolodner

Rebuilding Coop community and making the general meetings more interactive

The Coop's General Meeting grappled with one of the central issues of our time – how do people communicate, feel connected, and make important decisions in the age of COVID?

An informal group of Coop members who call themselves the "Coop Study Group"

have been meeting for the past several months to discuss ways to improve member participation and to support the Coop. This group brought those questions to the September GM and asked for feedback on several concrete suggestions to improve communication and participation during the GM; they also sought new ideas to make the GMs more community-minded, transparent and democratic.

On the one hand, virtual meetings might have allowed more people to attend who lived far away or lacked child care, said the presenter, George Olken. At the same time, people who are less tech-savvy or don't have stable Internet access have lost out. But the "Study Group" argued that all members—and the Coop itself—have lost something in the fog of Zoom. Overall attendance has decreased on Zoom versus in person meetings.

"Zoom is frustrating and isolating," Olken said. He acknowledged that the in-person meetings had also sometimes been frustrating but that Zoom meetings lack the energy of being in-person. One can't get a sense of the room, see how people are reacting or who's stepping out for a side conversation.

The study group was not blaming the Chair Committee for the problems, and several members of the Chair and Agenda Committees said they appreciated the constructive tone of the presentation. Two suggested changes had already been made—there is closed captioning available during the meeting and speakers are told how much time they have to speak and everyone is kept to the same number of minutes.

Another suggestion, which garnered some support, was to change the meeting format from "webinar" to "meeting" format. In the current webinar set up, participants can only see the hosts of the meeting and the person speaking. In a meeting format, you can see the faces (or names if participants want their camera off) of everyone attending. It also allows for reaction icons (thumbs up, clapping, etc) that everyone can see, and it allows everyone see who and how many people have their hands raised to speak. Break-out rooms are available, which facilitates smaller groups of people to meet and talk.

The other main suggestion from the study group was to turn the chat function back on to let members communicate directly with one another. One-on-one chats could be used to say hello to people you know, and the group chat would be another mode of communication among all members. The chat script could also be copied and made public, allowing more members to see what happened during the meeting beyond reading the official minutes.

“Democracy is messy,” Olken quipped, “but in the messiness is the joy.”



Additionally, the study group suggested that members could volunteer to provide live technical assistance to anyone having difficulty with any of the Zoom functions, like voting. Another suggestion was to use slides for presentations to help people follow the discussion.

“These are ideas, just food for thought,” Olken said as he wrapped up his presentation. “Our goals are greater participation through transparency and expanded accessibility. Our hope is to create more feeling of community at our meetings. When we can see each other we feel less alone. And when we can see who is here we feel part of a community. We’d love to hear your ideas.”

Several speakers said they liked many of the ideas proposed by the group.

“I’m new to the Coop,” said one member, who identified herself as Mary. “I really like the idea of being able to see people.”

General Coordinator Joe Holtz agreed. “I really appreciate the suggestions,” he said. “I so miss being able to look out at the audience and see the reactions I’m getting, see how many hands are up.”

David, a member of the Chair Committee, said he appreciated the tone of the presentation and reminded members that they did vote on the meeting format and the creation of a committee to carry them out.

He wasn’t in favor of re-instating the chat. While most members are respectful, he said, there are people who are “trolls,” there’s hate speech and “brigading” which make moderating a chat very challenging. He suggested posting a link in the chat for a Slack or Discord channel (which are other messaging platforms) for member communication.

Another member suggested that the chairs use an alternative channel, since they’re familiar with the technology, and leave the chat to meeting attendees to make it more accessible to people who aren’t as tech-savvy.

Treasury still struggling but there’s hope on the horizon

The Coop has lost $2.1 million in the last year, Joe Holtz reported. The IRS, however, owes the Coop $2.9 million in employee retention credits, and it is hopeful some of this will come in soon.

The number of paid staff went from 77 before the pandemic to more than 200 people during the height of the pandemic. On July 12, with the restoration of member labor, 80 percent of the temporary staff was laid off, and the goal is to no longer have tem-

porary staff by the end of October, which will save the Coop an additional $10,000 per week.

In response to a question about raising revenue by accepting more members, Holtz answered that the Coop is down 4,000 members since March 2020. By mid or late-October there should be an online onboarding system with appointments to visit to Coop to complete the joining process.

The Coop used to have 100 hours of shopping time, and it is now at 84. As the Coop adds more members, the General Coordinators hope to add more hours to keep the same limits on the number of people who are in the building.

Buyers report

If you've noticed some of your regular items missing in the cans aisle, it's not because your friends are suddenly buying all the same things that you are. The Coop's biggest dry goods distributor has been facing serious labor shortages. The Coop usually gets an 18-wheeler full of food five or six times a week, and they've been sending a quarter trailer or less. Buyers have been working very hard to find other distributors so even if your favorite brand isn't there, there should be a good substitute.

A bit of controversy

Members of the Hudson Valley Farm Coop Committee, which was formed to help launch an organization in the Hudson Valley with a goal to acquire and operate up to 15 farms, presented their structure and reporting proposal, which was required by the provisional approval granted at the April 2021 GM.

The goal of the group, said Teresa Santamaria, is to create "safer, saner and more sustainable food systems." The committee said they would report quarterly to the GM, open the first half of committee meetings to all members, and post meeting notices in advance. The proposal sponsors will recruit and interview members with expe-

rience in agriculture, real estate, finance law and business management, and the new members will be approved by a simple majority of the proposal's sponsors. Members will get credit for work on the committee, and committee members' bios will be posted on the Coop website.

There were questions about committee members being able to benefit from the creation of the Hudson Valley Coop, and in particular committee member Jonathan Farber. (Farber has been a member of the Coop for 28 years and is a landscape architect and farmer.)

Farber answered that his company could help to get the company up and running, but that would be up to the committee.

The proposal was approved.

Committee reports

Paul Warren, from the Equity Access and Community Committee, requested space on the agenda to vote on collecting demographic information of new members to find out who the Coop community is.

The Labor Committee, the International Trade Education squad, and the Agenda Committee are all looking for new members. There are links to these committees Coop website if people are interested in more information.

Open Forum

One member requested that the text of complicated issues be distributed in advance of the meetings so members had a chance to read and digest proposals. Coop staff said that they could provide link in the Google doc that has the agenda, which is posted in advance.

Another member asked when child care would be available. Joe Holtz said there weren't plans about when to bring back child care since the room is being used to package food so that Aisle 2 doesn't get too crowded. There is also a safety issue in terms of the virus. Holtz said he doesn't have answer as to how to make it happen but that the Coop is committed to bringing it back and that the issue needs further discussion.

One more vote

Two sitting members of the Hearing Officers Committee Election, which has had no hearings since the start of the pandemic, were overwhelmingly re-elected.

HOW CHILD CARE ISSUES ARE AFFECTING COOP MEMBERSHIP

May 31, 2022



Above: The Room Formerly Known as Childcare.

By Suzanne Cope

As of July 12, the Coop has reinstated member work requirements, requiring that every adult member of a household work a shift every seven weeks, for now.

Members can ask for a COVID exemption through October 31st (for reasons that include having a child at home who is too young to be vaccinated), but after that date nearly every adult member will need to sign up for shifts through the new scheduling system accessed via the online Member Services site. Hopes are that the Coop will begin to return to a new normal. Although there is one notable exception: the indefinite closing of the child care room.



No more choking concerns.

While I didn’t hear from any parents who want the child care room open, and the office has yet to field any requests, some parents who relied upon Coop-based child care to facilitate their work shift pre-pandemic find themselves in a challenging spot that echoes broader societal conversation around parenting and working in a pandemic.

Countless articles have highlighted the plight of working parents with limited or nonexistent childcare during the pandemic, who have had to negotiate work and sudden school closures and classroom quarantines, and whose mental health has suffered from the non-stop working and care-giving. Further, there are a record number of people leaving positions—often citing a disconnect between their own work-life balance and job expectations.

Here at the Coop, too, there is evidence that the return to in-person work requirements, with no flexibility for parents of young children, is taxing some parent-members.

Nell, a new member and parent to two elementary-aged kids, was excited to join to expand her family’s access to healthy and affordable foods. But she has become disillusioned with the seeming lack of flexibility of work requirements for parents of young kids, and worries that she will have even fewer options as she job-searches.

Nell said, “an issue I encountered is that there are few shifts that I can sign up for because I have to schedule the times where I know the kids are at school,” which are not plentiful. She had signed up for one on Monday, October 11th but then realized that she would have to reschedule because it was a school holiday. She added, “and once I find a new job, my options will dwindle down to nothing.” Gone, for the time being at least, are the days when one could bring their children in during the late afternoon or early evening, grab some snacks from downstairs for dinner, and have them work on homework or play during a parents’ shift.



Maya and Dora Solovey, mother and child. Maya says that she has to shop more frequently since there is no childcare, and that her daughter would love to play at the Coop. Sergio and Caetano Krakowski were the only other parents shopping together with their children at 11:00 a.m. on October 12.

A solo mom with a one year old said she might take a leave of absence after the October 31 COVID exemption is over, and another new parent, Sarah, has echoed the same. She says, “we’re definitely worried about what it will be like when [parent leave] runs out and we both have to do shifts with two kids and both of us working full time. We’re already thinking we might have to take a leave from the Coop.”

But the Coop is also in a tough position. The Coop has lost around 4,000 members in the last 18 months and has not been accepting any new members (although they will begin to do so soon). More members are needed both to provide people-power—and

to shop to bring in revenue.



The lack of child care has had an effect on shopping habits as well. Stephanie, a parent to a two and six year old, praised how the Coop has handled safety and resiliency over the last year and a half, and also loves the flexibility and ease of the new shift sign-up system. She says that her family has been "able to deal" with completing their shifts, but adds, "the combination of an earlier closing time and no child care means that we go less."

For her, these factors greatly limit when she can schedule solo shopping since she can't go after her childrens' bedtime, nor does she bring them over the weekend as the Coop had initially requested that children not accompany parents while shopping. She suspects other parents have limited their shopping for similar reasons, which frustrates her, because, she says, "I love the Coop and I want it to survive!"

Childcare challenges have affected my family as well. My new work shift on the *Gazette* is virtual, which fulfills my work requirement. But my husband Steve is the primary caregiver to our two year old, who is only in daycare part-time, and he must also pick up her brother from school by early afternoon. He has yet to schedule a shift

because he would be forced to give up some of the few hours he has to meet colleagues during normal work hours.

I work outside of the house and don't return until after the last shift starts. Most weekends are spent visiting extended family in upstate, leaving few options. "I would literally be paying daycare and losing money from lost work so that I can work at the Coop," Steve says. Luckily he had banked a number of FTOP shifts from years ago, so we have some time to figure out a workable solution.

Annette Laskaris, PSFC Membership Coordinator, has responded to these concerns noting that the decrease in members has made the work requirement more urgent. But she has some hopeful news as well, adding that she expects shopping hours to be lengthened again "within six months or less."

Annette also commented on the request to not bring children shopping, saying that it was done in the beginning of the pandemic when the lines were long and capacity limits were first introduced, with an aim to allow more shopping members into the Coop. The Coop has decided to continue these capacity limits but, she said, bringing children shopping is becoming less of an issue as there have been few, if no lines lately. "We want people to come shop," she said. "We need people to shop!"

Annette also noted that she has heard only a few complaints about the work requirement from parents with childcare challenges, and doesn't see the child care room opening in the foreseeable future.

Rather, she said that parents need to get creative about finding ways to schedule their work shifts. "You already have to manage your life outside of the Coop without anybody watching your kids," she says. "You can schedule whenever you have time, or can get a friend to watch your child… I think you can manage, even as a single parent."



The Coop still serves children.

Once the COVID exemption expires in a few weeks, time will tell if parents of young children can fulfill their work requirement, or if it becomes a reason they might have to leave the Coop as some have indicated. The grace period for suspension has been extended to 35 days, so that might give some caregivers time to find needed child-care. But perhaps the Coop can use this time to come up with a more tenable solution, possibly inspired by approaches that came up during the research of this article.

Often parents of young kids would use working in the childcare room as their work requirement, allowing them to contribute while still being with their children. Can we reframe the care of young children as a shift in and of itself: that one partner of a family with young kids might receive an earned work credit automatically to show we value the work done in the home to keep our young members healthy and safe? This would allow the Coop to be seen as a leader among institutions on prioritizing family care over traditional productivity, as they have shown themselves through their leadership keeping shoppers and workers safe and healthy during the last 18 months.

Or at the very least perhaps the Coop administration can model a program based on the long history of mutual aid in progressive communities, creating a formal system where members can contribute FTOP shifts for those who most need it. Certainly many families can “make it work”—as more than one interviewee told me—but why push already taxed families to the limit? Why create one more barrier to being a part of our community for access to affordable and healthy food?

Long-time member Carl, who is also the dad of two elementary-aged kids, supported finding easy avenues for Coop members to help out caregivers in need. He and his wife have some scheduling flexibility and will be able to manage their work shifts, but he acknowledges their privilege. “It’s people like me who should be stepping up to support the Coop for those who aren’t so lucky,” Carl said. “That’s the part of being in the Coop community that is meaningful to me.”