PROFILE OF A COOP ALLY: CHIPS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PETER ENDRISS

March 3, 2026

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By Oluwakemi Aladesuyi

With its dual mission to ameliorate food insecurity and homelessness in New York City, CHiPS (which stands for Community Help in Park Slope) has been serving our neighbors for decades and, during that time, witnessed how the needs of the most vulnerable among them have changed since its founding in 1971. If you're a member of the Park Slope Food Coop your initial portal to CHiPS might be as one of the options on the shift calendar. Each week Coop members fill about 100 work shifts at CHiPS—-making sandwiches, cooking, washing dishes and packaging meals as well as registering guests, managing lines and working with the mobile food pantry. Many more purchase extra food for CHiPS during one of the Coop's three-a-year food drives. "Our

more than 50-year relationship has been integral to the Coop," General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinksy notes. The Coop drops off dozens of less than perfect produce to CHiPS each week, enabling CHiPS to provide meal service to over 300 people every day. According to Astrinsky, the Coop's relationship with CHiPS "not only reduces our waste, it also enables us to help our neighbors indirectly."

Peter Endriss, CHiPS's executive director, is at the helm of an organization that has seen the number of people served by its food service and pantry programs increase by 400 percent since the beginning of the pandemic, all while operating the Frances Residence, a private temporary shelter for new mothers. Leading an organization like CHiPS "means a thousand different things at any given time," says Endriss. A W-2 at-will employee, he works with CHiPS' board of directors to help the organization stay on track financially and with its division directors to make sure programming stays on mission and is well measured, relevant and improved with the input of the people CHiPS serves. Endriss's work is expansive, encompassing administration of more efficient food service areas to fixing toilets in the residential units and managing a staff of 25 to 30, and last year, over 6,000 volunteers.

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>
> *GENERAL COORDINATOR ELINOAR ASTRINKSY*

"I could be sitting here and a pipe could burst," Endriss says. "Or we could be presented with a really unique opportunity. [Someone says] I have two cases of avocados. Can we figure out how to pick them up?" According to Endriss, the nonprofit tries to say yes to everything: "Every association, anything that someone wants to do to help out at CHiPS, we're like, yes, let's figure out a way to weave that into our mission."

True to the organization's deep roots, the "C" in CHiPS stands for community, having

once stood for “Christian,” in deference to the Catholic groups (notably St. Francis Aid) that initially founded the organization. Brother Tom, one of the longest running volunteers at CHiPS, recalls how two Franciscan brothers, a sister of St. Joseph, a Diocesan priest and a handful of parishioners wanted to do something for the neighborhood. In its earliest iteration it was a Sunday dinner for the elderly. After dinner, volunteers, mostly in their 20s and early 30s, would make rounds to visit the homebound. “The beginning of CHiPS was ad hoc,” Brother Tom says. Sister Mary Maloney, of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, taught at Bishop Loughlin High School in Fort Greene during the day and would make sure the doors of CHiPS were open in the evening to serve soup. Men would sleep on cots in the soup kitchen at nighttime. “Every now and then, one woman would come with a child and that was a little scary to me,” says Brother Tom. But a few years later the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor took the upper level of the building, a former convent for sisters who worked as religious ministers on Rikers, and turned it into a homeless shelter for single mothers and their babies.

Sister Mary Maloney was CHiPS’ first director. “She told me this many times, there was $500 in the bank which was enough to pay two months rent, but there was no money for food,” says Brother Tom. It all came from the people of the neighborhood. “The first time they had $1,000 in the bank it was a gift from the synagogue on Garfield Place. The Rabbi gave half from his money and half from the synagogue itself.”

In many ways CHiPS’ deep roots in the Park Slope community continue to be a saving grace in an era when so much government funding has been drying up. Since the beginning of his tenure in 2023, Endriss has seen CHiPS’ annual operating budget nearly double, to about $2.9 million. In 2026, 40% of that budget is expected to come from individuals contributing small donations each month. The remainder is supported by larger gifts from local businesses, a few corporations and the occasional fundraising drive by public schools or community groups. “We had a local bar do a burlesque show to collect money for CHiPS. We ended up getting a few thousand dollars in donations,” Endriss says. “There are so many community members that want to help in

their own way.”

It was that kind of community outreach that initially brought Endriss into the orbit of CHiPS. In 2014, Endriss was running Runner & Stone, the bakery and restaurant on 3rd Avenue, when he helped organize “CHiPS Night Out” the organization’s first fundraising event, in which local bars and restaurants committed to donating 15% of their net sales on a given day. That led to Endriss’s fundraising for a gala. He served on the organization’s board from 2016-2021 and assumed the role of executive director in June of 2023.

In some ways being executive director is a bow on a career that has been about community and a passion for food that began in childhood. “Since I was five years old I was telling everyone that would listen that I was going to have a restaurant at some point,” says Endriss. “I remember making a diorama in elementary school of the restaurant that I wanted to open,” he added, also noting fond memories of his aunt taking the whole family to a Chinese buffet on Long Island where he tried everything. “I was obsessed with it. I was also obsessed with planetariums. So my idea was to open a Chinese smorgasbord in a planetarium and I made a little diorama with little tables and a big dome top that was going to be where the stars were projected.”

Endriss worked in restaurants throughout secondary school and college. Although he studied natural resource management and engineering at Cornell, and eventually got a masters degree in civil engineering at Stevens University, he found his way back to the kitchen when he started working at a salad station at a *New York Times* 3-star restaurant in Manhattan during a leave of absence from a job inspecting bridges.

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>
> *PETER ENDRISS, CHIPS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR*

As the fourth executive director of CHiPS, Endriss is building on the foundation that other directors had built. Over 50 years later, Endriss says he still hears stories of Sister Mary Maloney from volunteers. “I came in and got to take all these amazing things that had been built already,” he says, explaining how Denise Scaravella, the second executive director, built so much community goodwill and partnerships and how his direct predecessor, Shivonne McKay, modernized the nonprofit—adding staff and departments, measuring the impact of the nonprofit’s work and being more decisive about programming.

Denise Scaravella was the previous Executive Director of CHiPs.
“I had this staff that I always describe as a loaded spring. Everyone was so full of ideas and good intent and so mission driven,” says Endriss. “Meetings were like ‘here are five amazing ideas, we just need to pick two of them to start and figure out how to do it.’”

Every day, 300 to 400 people come to CHiPS for its food services. “We are providing end of the line service,” said Endriss. “We’re not necessarily teaching them how to cook. We’re not helping them make more money so they don’t need to come here for food.” But CHiPS is trying to figure out how to connect these individuals with resources further upstream. Last year, it hired a director of case management to make sure there are warm handoffs to organizations that help with English language classes, job training, mental health services or addiction resources, for example. “The idea with any nonprofit is that you put yourself out of business,” Endriss adds.

That said, CHiPS just completed its five-year strategic plan. “We are on the cusp of expanding, or I often correct myself and say right-sizing our operations,” says Endriss. CHiPS has been operating out of the same 100-year-old brownstone for the past 50 years.

Looking towards the future, Endriss sees CHiPS continuing to maintain its strong presence in Park Slope while expanding into a larger building and potentially operating the pantry program from a warehouse.

As CHiPS has grown, so has the scope of the Frances Residence. Beyond providing shelter to nine mothers and their children, the program helps mothers find a path to self-sufficiency. However, shifting federal, state and city policies along with New York’s increasingly high cost of living and lack of affordable housing has made that even harder. Because the Frances Residence is a private shelter, the families who live there might have to go back into the city system for a minimum of three months in order to be eligible to apply for a government housing voucher. According to Endriss, a pilot program to address this was vetoed by the last mayoral administration.

“You do often feel like you’re in a little life raft being tossed around on an ocean of things that are outside of your control,” says Endriss. “That can be frustrating because the issues we face are immediate. Someone needs a place to live now. They need food for their families now. Not two months from now or worse yet a year from now.”

With Endriss at the helm, CHiPS is doing all it can to meet those urgent needs as soon as possible, for as many of our neighbors as possible.

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

March 3, 2026

December 9, 2025

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 in-

cludes some 3 million people in New York state.

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.

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.)

> “THERE WAS AN OUTPOURING OF SUPPORT FOR EACH OTHER AND FOR THE COMMUNITY.”
>
> *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."

> "I WAS EXCITED TO SEE THE COOP LEADING TO MOBILIZE THE VAST RESOURCES IN OUR COMMUNITY TO HELP THOSE AT RISK OF STARVING."
>
> *BRYONY ROMER*

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.

HELPING COMMUNITIES BEYOND THE COOP’S WALLS

March 3, 2026

November 18, 2025

By Emmett Lindner

For decades, Lewanika Senghor worked at the Coop in different roles, pitching in with membership coordination, tech support and aiding members. But he and his family were also working tirelessly to help the communities beyond the Coop’s walls.

Mr. Senghor, his wife, their daughter and others run the Village House Pantry, which distributes food donations from restaurants, bakeries—and, yes, the Coop—to people in need. They stock fridges around the city for people who need to focus on rent or childcare and can then think less about where to get a meal.

The work can be grueling: Mr. Senghor and his family finance the program but are hoping for funding to strengthen their efforts. At times, they pull 17-hour days, driving to Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, Eataly, movie sets and restaurants to pick up leftover food and stock fridges so that New York residents dealing with disabilities, lapses in employment or other challenges can have a stocked kitchen.

Mr. Senghor and his family make sure that the food is quality and the fridges are clean and neatly organized. Residents who go to the Pantry's main location, on Midwood and Rogers, come so often that the food is often gone within the hour it's set out.

In an interview, Mr. Senghor discussed how he developed his passion for helping his neighbors, what goes into the wide network of food distribution and how he hopes to make an impact. This interview has been edited and condensed.

> "I ALWAYS WONDERED: WHY ARE THINGS THE WAY THEY ARE? IF WE HAVE MORE VACANT APARTMENTS, WHY IS ANYBODY HOMELESS? AND IF WE HAD MORE FOOD IN ONE STATE, WHY WAS THERE ANYBODY HUNGRY IN THE WORLD?"

How did all this start for you?

As we speak, I'm recalling all sorts of things—watching civil rights on television with Dr. King, and just wondering why the world wasn't the way it could have been.

I remember in the '70s and '80s finding out that the state of Wisconsin alone produced enough food to feed the world four times over, and New York City in the '70s and '80s had more vacant apartments and homes than it had homeless people.

I always wondered: Why are things the way they are? If we have more vacant apartments, why is anybody homeless? And if we had more food in one state in a big coun-

try, why was there anybody hungry in the world? To me, those are contradictions that don’t make any sense.

You realize that if there was a desire and a will to do it, nobody should be hungry, nobody should be homeless.

What happened after that realization?

You start to look at the inequities or the things that were happening in this country. You juxtapose it against history: The great potato famine, when food was being exported out of Ireland to serve the British Empire and Americas, but people are starving inside of the country that the food is being taken from. That’s happening all over the world.

At the Brooklyn Borough Hall greenmarket on Saturday, November 1.

At the Brooklyn Borough Hall greenmarket on Saturday, November 1.
Back in the ’80s, I was very involved in the student movement and community movements. You figure, if you input yourself, you could actually help to make change, and you put yourself out there hoping that your input would help.

You have a sense that an individual can make an impact.

Yes. Back then we thought that our involvement would help make changes, and yes, I still think that people can make changes. I think that is definitely shown in the Coop.

You can have people come together and work for food, keep the overhead low, because using member labor is great. That’s something that can happen throughout the country. And at times it did.

What do you focus on now?

Most of my time is spent doing food rescue and reallocation with my family, but we’ve been doing that for quite some time. Since COVID, it took on a whole different thing. For a while, we were dealing with about 100 families. In the past, we’ve taken food to people who were finding themselves going through difficult time periods. It expanded, and we moved into picking up food and taking it to community fridges.

The Senghors’ car trunk full of vegetables.

The fridges are all over. We have some people in Seattle and down in Baltimore. We have other friends that are involved in it as well. They call them to help start up fridges in different areas. It’s all Brooklyn, Manhattan and some places in Queens and the Bronx. There are fridges that are open to the public for people to come and take food.

We can put food in the fridge now and sometimes within five minutes, but usually within half an hour, a full fridge full of food is gone.

> “A LOT OF THIS HAS BEEN DONE ON OUR OWN DIME—PAYING THE TOLLS, THE GAS, THE REPAIRS TO THE VEHICLE THAT WASN’T INTENDED FOR THIS.”

How much of your time was that taking?

We were doing this probably about 17 hours a day. We were running around picking up food, because earlier on in the pandemic, we were getting calls for businesses that either their freezers were failing, their refrigeration was failing, or they were going out of business.

We were picking up a lot of food from places that knew about people who were rescuing food and reallocating it. And we would be filling the fridges up. We'd be picking up at 11 at night, filling the fridges up to 2 in the morning.

What does your work look like now?

We serve between 800 and 1,200 people a week. Combined, probably closer to 2,000 or more. We do a distribution every Thursday on the street, and about six to eight other groups pick up from us. They also do their distributions.

Sometimes we have people who take food to Prospect Park, and they'll give it out to the homeless there. And sometimes we'll have people who make the food, because we try to build out the organization as opposed to us doing everything ourselves.

What kinds of food do you distribute?

It varies from day to day. At one time we were getting so many bananas, and bananas are the type of fruit that you can't put in the fridge. But we've gotten all sorts of things—you name it. We've gotten fresh fruit and vegetables, we've gotten eggs, we've gotten milk, canned goods as well as frozen. We've got ice creams and cakes.

Community Fridge located at Union St. and Bond St. in Brooklyn.


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Community
Fridge works
to connect,
empower
& engage the
LOVE
through
and
access

Stocking the community fridge.
We also do clothing. My wife gives out winter coats and shoes and gloves and hats and scarves. We've done medical supplies, like walkers and wheelchairs. We've been doing these types of things for years. This is just another phase of what we've been doing.

What's the reaction from the community?

The overall response has been: "Thank you." There are people who are working who still are not making enough to live comfortably. Some people have been able to utilize us to allow them to save so they can actually put a down payment on their home. Some people have been going through things where they didn't have clothes for their children or food for their children, and it helped them keep things going.

Sometimes people have been released from work and they find that this has been beneficial. Some people are living in their cars. Some people have health problems, cancers and other issues, and they find that being able to come and pick up food has been helpful.

What do you see as the next step for this work?

We're looking to get funding. A lot of this has been done on our own dime—paying the tolls, the gas, the repairs to the vehicle that wasn't intended for this. We want to expand, get a vehicle specifically for this, get a place where we can continue doing distribution even during the harshest weather.

> "I THINK THERE ARE BASIC LIFE REQUIREMENTS THAT PEOPLE NEED IN ORDER TO SURVIVE. WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING AS A FAMILY IS WORKING TOWARD BUILDING COMMUNITY."

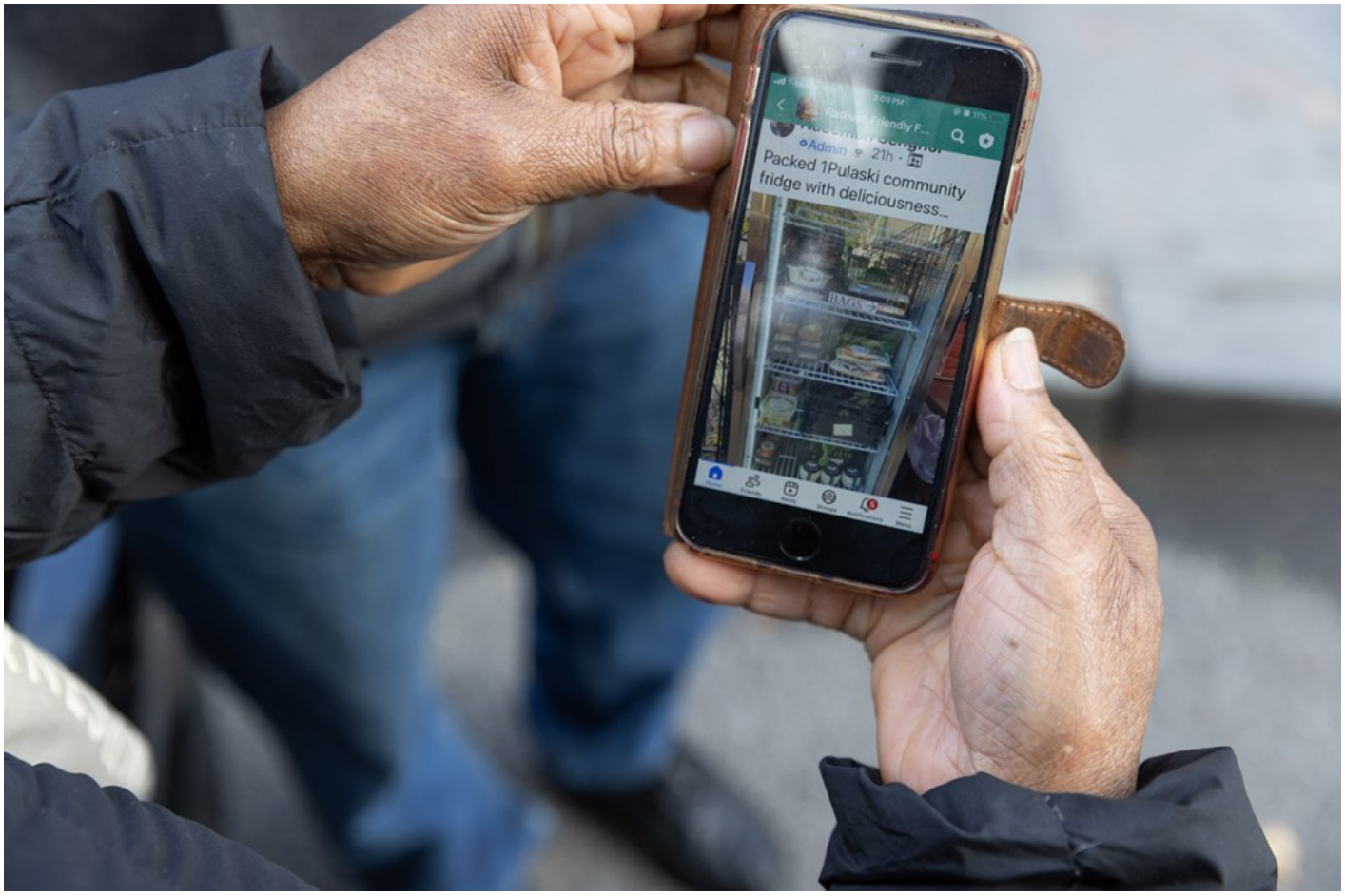
Right now we're doing distribution from the street, other than what we do from the home. We'd like some place where we can have people actually come through. We have visions where we could get food and have people who can prepare it, maybe a $5 meal or $10 meal, something low-cost.

We've had chefs bring food to give out. I have the vision that we can get a storefront and do something like that.

Have you discussed the SNAP cancellation with anyone who uses the fridges?

People who use the fridges aren't as concerned. What I find is people who have not been using the fridges have been contacting us. How do we set up a fridge? How do we get it stocked? I think people who use the fridges and who come to the distribution already understand that there are some resources out there. The question is, how do people change over from being used to going to a market and buying this stuff to now going to the various pantries that are out there?

One of the things that people would often say to us when we offer them food is, "I'm going to leave it for the people who are more in need," and now, when they find themselves being those people, many times people have a social consciousness as to whether or not it's right for them to take food, or whether or not it seems appropriate, or whether or not they want to be seen doing this.



Dropoffs are posted to social media to let neighbors know.

When I hear people say that, I often tell them, we don't necessarily provide food for the people who are "in need." We provide food for people who eat, because we find that a lot of people may be just a few dollars above what they consider the cut off level for receiving benefits, and they find themselves struggling to just make it, or they may be a little behind. Something like this will throw a person, and they find that unless they're far ahead, they can quickly be behind.

The fridges already run out of food quickly—do you expect that to increase?

Yes, and this is a challenge for people who do this type of work. Sometimes if we're there, people take a small amount, and they'll let the next people get a small amount. But we've gone to places where maybe 10 or 20 mangoes are in the fridge, and you'll have somebody who will come and take 15 of them. When we're there, we don't allow that, but it's not really something you want to do, policing how people receive food. We have found it necessary because some people are not necessarily con-

siderate of other people, but at the same time you have to weigh it — this person came first, this person came second. This person is an older person. It varies.

The government has emergency funds to deal with these things. Hopefully, the bill that's in Congress now will pass to provide people more services. But there's more than enough food to feed everybody. It's just that there has to be a mandate and an understanding that there is enough food, and it has to be made available.

What's the larger goal for you in all of this?

I think there are basic life requirements that people need in order to survive. What we've been doing as a family is working toward building community. Community, I think, is what we need. We have neighborhoods, but we have very few communities.

The difference is that in a neighborhood, you'll see people you recognize, but you don't have any real common supportive mechanism in place. I think that's what we need to build, not just here but all over the world.

That's why we call it the Village House Pantry. We have gatherings with friends and family to build what I call personal communities.

We need to build communities that are thinking of our common goals and objectives in which everybody can benefit. If we can do that—not just here, but everywhere—we're in a better position. We achieve more.

Emmett Lindner works on the breaking and trending news desk at The New York Times*.*

THE COOP MEMBERS TRAVELING HOURS TO SHOP HERE

March 3, 2026

WHY SOME MEMBERS TREK FROM FAR OUTSIDE THE CITY TO BUY ORGANIC CUCUMBERS

October 7, 2025

By Kayla Levy

During each shift cycle, Kendal Bayer and her husband drive four hours round-trip, with their son in tow, to work and shop at the Coop. It's been like this since 2016, when the couple first moved to Long Island from Brooklyn.

"The Coop always factored into discussions about our move," Bayer said. "I didn't want to move somewhere it wasn't viable to stay members."

For a grocery store where some members balk at returning carts even a block beyond the half-mile return zone, it's hard to imagine many traveling here from outside the

five boroughs.

The Membership Office doesn’t keep a list of members who reside outside the city, but long-haul commuting happens often enough to be the stuff of anecdote. One member told me that someone on her cheese-processing shift came in for the day from Cold Spring, N.Y., about 60 miles to the north. Another said he worked checkout with a member who lives in New Rochelle, which borders the Bronx. Several mentioned rumors of members who live as far away as Vermont.

So we went and found some to learn why they continue to make the sometimes grueling trips to 782 Union Street.

These far-flung members didn’t always live outside New York City. Everyone I spoke to joined while a city resident—most residing within walking distance in Brooklyn. Some moved a bit farther afield over the years, to South Brooklyn or Queens, but they were still close enough to keep up with weekly shops and consistent shifts without much trouble.

“When I lived in Bensonhurst, I biked to work in TriBeCa, so I’d just stop at the Coop on my way home,” said Tracy Balzano, who became a member in 2001 while living in South Slope and has since moved to the Catskills.

Moving farther out certainly changes things. Members who live far away understandably tend to visit less regularly than they once did. Whereas the average American makes around six grocery trips per month, long-distance Coop members typically stop by only once a month.

Fela Cortes, who’s lived in Westchester since 2021, tries to make the 45-minute drive every three weeks. “I do have to supplement some purchases in between, but the majority of our items come from the Coop,” Cortes said.

Trips are even less frequent for Nepreil Foster, who until recently commuted nearly two hours from Norwalk, Conn. She just moved to Greenwich, about an hour's drive away, and now tries to make it in once per shift cycle. "When we looked for a new place, it had to be closer to the Coop to keep this up," she said.

Many long-haul members also have ongoing commitments in New York City that make regular visits—and continued membership—a little more practical.

Balzano, for example, still commutes from the Catskills to Manhattan Tuesday through Thursday for work, which allows her to shop or cover shifts in the evenings. Jessica Robinson, a former General Coordinator, moved to Western Massachusetts in 2021, but after decades in Brooklyn, she maintains strong ties to both the Coop and the borough. "I come down pretty regularly to see friends or family, and when I know I have a trip planned, I just go on the virtual office calendar and book a shift," she said.

These members say they continue to shop at the Coop for the same reasons many shoppers turn away from big supermarket chains: quality and price.

For Bayer, it comes down to organic cucumbers. Her son, Julian, eats one per day, but turnover in their Long Island store is so slow that cucumbers are often rotten and $3.50 apiece. (They regularly go for $1 at the Coop.) For Balzano, it's the Fresno chilies, which she goes through in droves and can get for $2 a bag at the Coop—three times less than the 8-oz. container at her local store in the Catskills. The list goes on.

Even in areas where produce can sometimes be bountiful, the Coop maintains an edge. Robinson said the Coop's produce, bulk goods and items packaged onsite are all fresher and less expensive than what she can get at her local coop in Western Massachusetts (which follows a more typical retail model).

"Once you have to regularly shop elsewhere, you quickly realize how much fresher the food is at the Coop," she said. While there are plenty of supermarkets near Greenwich, Conn., Foster says she struggles to find produce that isn't wrapped in plastic.

Then there is the matter of time. While most Americans shop at two grocery stores per week to cover their needs, the Coop is a one-stop shop for many. Cortes said that the cost of tolls and gas required to get to Brooklyn from Westchester is worth the trade-off of only shopping at one store. "I know I won't have to go from place to place looking for products. The Coop will have everything, and the prices will be better," she said.

To be sure, there are undeniable impracticalities to driving hours for bulk beans or hauling pounds of chilis on a three-hour train ride home. But for many long-distance members, as for those who live closer, the Coop is more than a pragmatic choice.

"The things I buy at the Coop are politically important to me," said Balzano, who is shopping there less frequently these days but remains intentional about supporting ethical businesses.

There’s also the feeling of being at the Coop, which is not replicated in other markets—especially for lifelong members. “In my family we call the Coop ‘Mother Coop,’ because going there is almost like going to see a family member,” said Foster, whose own mother was among the early Coop members. “Everybody there is friendly, and we feel a sense of trust.”

For Bayer’s family, the trek from Long Island has become something of a ritual. They always drive in early for lunch at Numero 28 Pizzeria, and Julian picks up a new book from Community Bookstore to read while his parents organize and scan invoices in the Membership Office.

After Bayer shops, the family grabs Mexican food for dinner before the two-hour drive home. “It’s a long day, but my husband is on board because he knows it’s something I enjoy so much,” Bayer said. “He complains, but I think he secretly enjoys it too.”

FOOD IN COMMUNITY: MEMBERS CONNECT THROUGH MEALS

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By William Doran

Food is at the heart of the Coop’s mission. Even in today’s divisive world, the need to eat is a commonality we cannot escape as animal beings.

Eating in community is even better. Yet New York City is full of people who eat alone. Even those living—and eating—with partners or children still often mindlessly chomp

through meals. Fewer and fewer people seem to truly know their immediate communities, which makes it hard to connect, share burdens, or feel less alone. So I embarked on a mission to find people in our Coop community who are actively connecting through food.

MEMBER RACHEL LUO JOINED THE COOP IN 2018 AND STARTED HOSTING COOKBOOK DINNERS, WHERE FRIENDS AND STRANGERS COULD SHARE A MEAL.

Rachel Luo joined the Coop in 2018 and has built a thriving network in New York by bringing people together through food. She started hosting cookbook dinners, where friends and strangers could share a meal and forge new connections. She explained, “I pick out a cookbook… something culturally interesting or maybe something I don’t know about.” She then invites a handful of people to cook items from some of the book’s recipes and enjoy them together.

Coop member Rachel Luo hosts cookbook dinners. Photograph by Michael Berman.

Picks have included *My America* by Kwame Onwuachi, *Bethlehem* by Fadi Kattan, and *Chinese Enough* by Kristina Cho. In Cho's book, a chapter titled "It Takes A Village" highlights communal recipes prepared with others as a way of bonding. Luo added, "I made dumplings with my parents when I was little, but I grew up in Houston in predominantly White spaces." She recalled, "I wasn't getting a lot of exposure to other people who were Chinese American. Food was the way that I started to understand pieces of that identity." After a recent dinner, Luo gave guests two little bags of frozen dumplings to take home: one containing her own family's recipe and the other filled with Cho's.

"MY FAMILY IS PUNJABI, AND PLANNING AROUND FOOD AND COMMENSALITY IS IN-

GRAINED IN INDIAN CULTURE," SAYS MEMBER MANDIRA GHAI.

Luo's passion for connection extends beyond cookbook dinners, though. After moving into her current building, she lamented that the culture there didn't embrace socializing. So, she created a text chat group, adding people as she met them in the hallways. She then made some food, sat out in the garden, and invited the neighbors. But she wondered, "What if nobody shows and I'm just sitting out here?" Happily, she managed to wrangle half of the building's 30 residents. She added, "I met one of my best friends through this garden picnic. She lives in my building."

Reporter William Doran hosted some members of the Cooking Club for dinner at his apartment. His main course was orzo with fresh peas. Photograph by Michael Berman.

Other PSFC members are building community at the Coop. Mandira Ghai, who joined

in 2016, co-chairs the Cooking Squad, which hosts free monthly cooking classes. Growing up, Ghai expressed how her parents really set the stage for a life of community-building through food. “My family is Punjabi, and planning around food and commensality is ingrained in Indian culture.” *Commensality* is defined as sharing a meal at a common table.

> IN CHALLENGING TIMES—PERSONAL OR COLLECTIVE—FOOD SERVES A PIVOTAL ROLE IN CONNECTING PEOPLE.

Her parents, newly emigrated from India, ingeniously taught cooking classes from their home in Pittsburgh to expand their social circle. Ghai continued her parents’ legacy when she joined the Cooking Squad in 2018. She fondly remembered: “It was a dynamic shift with people regularly collaborating to put together an instructive hour in a small space. Our squad had a very respectful and welcoming rapport. We became friends.”

The author slicing cucumbers. Photograph by Michael Berman.

When the pandemic hit, everything changed. In-person classes and member labor ceased. The Coop hired additional staff to keep operating, including chefs to feed everyone. Instead of stewing in individual panic, Ghai wanted to contribute. Cooking was still the answer. In 2020, she volunteered twice to prepare lunch for approximately 60 staff members. Ghai reflected that “cooking provided a different level of gratitude and empathy. I saw the staff’s hustle amidst uncertainty and fear. The way they reshuffled to keep members safe and informed was truly remarkable.”

In challenging times—personal or collective—food serves a pivotal role in connecting people. Before the pandemic, the Coop member and professional chef Ronna Welsh found inspiration and community as she navigated caring for her newborn daughter, who was born with special needs.

Welsh described how life's challenges still brought her back to food: "I had a team of therapists come to my house daily for months, and when we weren't talking about my daughter, we were talking about food." The small community that developed around her daughter's care pushed her to develop a larger community around teaching people how to cook. Welsh continued, "I started to teach when I realized that my work as a chef could extend beyond feeding those who paid for a meal. The therapists made up my very first class."

Other members of the Cooking Club join over Zoom. Photograph by Michael Berman.

Welsh eventually opened a cooking school in Sunset Park—Purple Kale Kitchenworks—and wrote a cookbook. She also began hosting community-oriented events out of her professional studio kitchen. Welsh recently connected with a close friend who had been organizing storytelling nights in the Hudson Valley, and hosted a storytelling

night of her own in her kitchen. “The storytelling is wonderful, and the space we provide afterwards for people to talk and laugh (and eat!) is magical. I love how food is integral to the evening, but not the star of the show.”

Last year, Welsh deployed her skills to help the Coop’s Cooking Squad. “Ronna brought a lot of expertise and attention to pulling together the details of the classes,” remarked Jeff Bonar, who co-chairs the squad with Mandira Ghai. The squad now films and broadcasts classes from Welsh’s studio, since they are still hosted virtually.

> PATRONIZING NEIGHBORHOOD ESTABLISHMENTS IS QUINTESSENTIAL NEW YORK COMMUNITY BUILDING.

Bonar shared some of his own experiences growing up around food in Los Angeles. “My father owned a Jewish deli. So I grew up around barrels of pickles, learned how to slice lox, and made butter in this big wooden churn.” Today, when he isn’t at the Coop, Bonar finds community close to home in Ridgewood, Queens, where he takes his four-year-old grandson to the local coffee shop. “We’ll show up and they know him. They know what he orders. This is a very New York thing—he knows which coffee shop has which pastry that he likes.”

Left to right: Cooking Club members Ronna Welsh, Michael Venzor, Willam Doran, Elana Sigall. Photograph by Michael Berman.

Patronizing neighborhood establishments is quintessential New York community building. Bonar noted that other parents come up and introduce themselves because they recognize his grandson from daycare. “That blows me away about New York. I know it’s a bunch of neighborhoods and people live locally, but this is such a potent demonstration of that.”

At the Coop, Bonar has been working with Ghai to reignite the cooking classes. They recruited local chef Jeffrey Mason to teach the first virtual class in 2023. Mason recently shared his experience: “I had done lots of shifts at the Coop and wanted to do something a little different, something that I connected with. A previous job as a sous chef included training and teaching new cooks. I really connected with sharing my

knowledge with people who wanted to learn.”

Close-up of peas cooking. Photograph by Michael Berman.

Mason became a community builder himself when he recruited his neighbor and friend, Siavash Haghtalab, to join the Coop the following year. Haghtalab grew up in Tehran surrounded by food traditions. He passionately described cooking as a way to show love. “I think community, food and culture go hand in hand. As humans, this is ingrained in our traditions and cultures. I show love to people by cooking them Persian food.” Food connected these two neighbors and it brought Haghtalab to lead two of the Coop’s most well-attended cooking classes.

As I closed my conversation with Rachel Luo, she really hit the core of what it means to build community in an uncertain world. “I invite a lot of random people to my dinners. It’s kind of intimidating!” she exclaimed. “At the same time, building those con-

nections requires you to be a little bit vulnerable. New York City can be a lonely place. It’s important to be able to make it smaller. Connecting really changes that dynamic. We’re not just random people living next to each other.”

Top image, Left to right: Elana Sigall, Rachel Luo, Ronna Welsh, and William Doran.