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METRO MONEY

# New York City Serves Up Food to Fill in the Gaps Amid the Pandemic

More than 40 million free meals have been served since mid-March



A worker at a New York City food bank at Acorn Community High School in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn.

PHOTO: ANNE KADET FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By

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In response to the pandemic, New York City has served more than 40 million free meals since mid-March. And the volume is increasing. Last week, nearly 1.5 million free meals were dished out every day.

That's a lot of food! And no one seems to be properly marveling at these crazy numbers. How did the city, not generally known for a nimble response, manage to launch its gargantuan free-food programs in a matter of days?

One Friday afternoon in mid-March, Cas Holloway, head of public enterprise for Unqork, a Manhattan-based no-code software application program, got a call from Jessica Tisch,

commissioner of New York City's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications.

Many seniors and medically vulnerable residents couldn't leave home to buy food as a result of the pandemic, and even those who could afford online grocery delivery were facing multiday delays, she told him.

The city needed Unqork to build a digital platform that would allow residents to order free meals to be delivered by the thousands of city-licensed taxi and ride-share drivers who were desperate for work. Could Unqork get this done over the weekend?

"I think we can," Mr. Holloway said.

He put his team on it. By Monday, the platform, which cost the city about \$600,000, was up and running. The city's Emergency Food Home Delivery program is now serving nearly 900,000 meals a day, said Kathryn Garcia, the city's Department of Sanitation commissioner who is serving as its "food czar."

Residents can go online at [nyc.gov/getfood](https://nyc.gov/getfood) or call 311 to complete a short eligibility screening. They can sign up for a month of meals at a time, with deliveries every three days.

On the other end are 18,000 registered taxi and ride-share drivers who can snag delivery routes using a smartphone app. They pick up meals at one of 10 hubs and are paid \$53 to complete an algorithm-generated route of six stops, Ms. Garcia said.

The meals are prepared by 40 different vendors ranging from private catering outfits to a company that supplies meals to airlines. They typically are reimbursed \$7 to \$9 for each prepared meal.

Judging by reports posted by recipients on social media, meal quality can vary depending on the vendor. Several have been dismissed for not meeting program standards, while new ones are continually added, Ms. Garcia said.



Free food was distributed last month outside a Brooklyn mosque and cultural center.

PHOTO: SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

As the delivery program was launching, the New York City Department of Education was marshaling its own effort to offer free “Grab-and-Go” meals to youngsters prepared by cafeteria employees working out of roughly 500 of the city’s 1,700 closed public schools. The program soon expanded to serve adults.

Now, anyone can stop by a school and pick up as many free meals as they need, regardless of their financial situation. No questions asked.

The department said it is serving about 540,000 free meals a day, compared with the 900,000 free meals it provides to students when school is in session.

Liz Accles, executive director of NYC-based nonprofit Community Food Advocates, is pleased by the city’s effort. While there have been glitches ranging from lack of signage at schools to missed deliveries, people are getting fed, she said. “Government is usually not quick into action. It’s usually slow and cumbersome. That’s what’s extraordinary about this.”

So how’s the food?

I went to several Brooklyn public schools last week to sample free meals. My first Grab-and-Go lunch featured a turkey sandwich on bread of indeterminate variety, mustard and mayo packets, two clementines and a carton of fat-free chocolate milk.

I texted a photo to a friend.

“Wow, that’s \$9.40 at the Port Authority,” he replied.

Breakfast the next day was a carb-tastic feast of whole-grain Cheerios, milk, a bagel, cream cheese and jam. The vegetarian lunch option I chose on day three offered hummus, wheat

crackers, canned green beans, sliced apples and a packet of Butter Crunchers cookies. The cookies were delicious.



Employees prepared to-go donation meals for Collective Fare last month in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

PHOTO: STEPHANIE KEITH/GETTY IMAGES

Recipients I spoke with said they were satisfied. Brooklyn homemaker Lillian Vargas, stopping by a school in Brooklyn's Prospect Heights to get meals for her family, said her husband and two adult children had been laid off from retail jobs. "The system's been helping a lot," she said.

Of course, even when lunch is free, there really is no such thing as a free lunch. Who is paying for all this?

On the Grab-and-Go side, meals provided to children will be covered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture at the Summer Food Service Program rate of roughly \$2 to \$4 for each meal.

Beyond that, who knows? Ms. Garcia said the city hopes to be reimbursed for the remainder through other federal programs, but the outcome is uncertain.

"We weren't going to wait to figure the whole thing out before we started," she said. "Not having people get food would be a bad thing."

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