

Politics

# 'They've shifted the burden to us': A food pantry struggles to feed an increasingly hungry Ohio community

By Robert Samuels  
November 1, 2018

NELSONVILLE, Ohio — Margaret Sheskey flipped the sign for the Nelsonville Food Cupboard from “OPEN” to “CLOSED” and stared at the charity’s tall, empty shelves. At the beginning of the day, they were packed with free food. Now, the only things left were spray canisters of Pam, a stray packet of Alka-Seltzer, three bags of powdered milk, some dried plums and a dozen cans of cranberry sauce. Everything else had been pulled off the shelves by some of southeastern Ohio’s poorest residents, who came to this place when they had no options left.

“Sixty families today,” Sheskey said.

“Ten more than last week,” her husband, Larry Lafferty, replied.

For a nonprofit in an impoverished town, the day had all the makings of a success. Every family went home with food that would help them get through the next month: tuna mac and cheese, boxes of cereal, long-grain rice, potatoes, peaches, corn on the cob, a large watermelon, chicken legs and loaves of bread.

ADVERTISING

The advertisement features the Sally Hansen logo at the top left, with the tagline 'SELF-MADE BEAUTY'. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo for 'miracle GEL™'. The central text reads 'GEL-LIKE WEAR' in large, bold, white letters, followed by 'NOW IN MATTE TOP COAT' in smaller white letters. Below this is a white rectangular button with the text 'SHOP NOW' in black. On the right side of the ad, there is a black and white image of a Sally Hansen miracle GEL nail polish bottle. The bottle has a black cap with 'STEP 1 COLOR' written on it and a white label with the Sally Hansen logo and 'miracle GEL' text. A white right-pointing arrow is positioned to the right of the bottle.

But Sheskey and Lafferty were already focused on a question that has increasingly come to shape the work they do: Could they find enough food before the pantry reopened? Finding food has always been a challenge, but the

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task is getting even tougher — a consequence of an ongoing shift in how states distribute federal grants to help the poor.

More and more states are imposing stricter time limits and increasing work requirements for residents seeking assistance. Rather than focusing on giving money through monthly checks or food stamps, state governments are making greater investments in employment training, child care and education.

These changes are the result of an escalating national debate over where and when the government should involve itself in the lives of the poor. That debate became even more intense earlier this year after a coalition of rural mayors in this part of Ohio discovered that more than \$500 million of federal money sent to the state for anti-poverty efforts had yet to be used.

Meanwhile, Lafferty and Sheskey found themselves scrambling to cater to an ever-growing clientele.

“They’ve shifted the burden to us,” Lafferty said.

When Sheskey’s father founded the pantry in the late 1980s, Nelsonville was a working-class city of 5,000, and its economy was animated by coal mining and manufacturing jobs at a shoe factory. The food pantry served as an emergency stop for families when budgets ran tight.

Sheskey and her husband took over the pantry after her father died in 2014. They had both retired from jobs in the fundraising department at Ohio University and figured running the place wouldn’t take too much effort. But Nelsonville had changed. The shoe factory was gone. Coal mining was on the decline. And the line for the pantry was stretching onto the sidewalk, with the same families coming month after month.

The pantry had become more than an emergency stop for families; it was a lifeline.

“I realized the poverty was so deep that they would never get out of it,” Sheskey said. “It was deeper than I imagined.”

Soon after she took over operations, Sheskey arranged to move the pantry to a grocery store that had long gone out of business. In 2015, they were serving about 200 families each month. Three years later, that number had grown to almost 700 — all of them depending on Sheskey and Lafferty to find food to restock their shelves.

“We really had something good today,” Sheskey said to her husband. “Those peaches were beautiful.”

“And the melons, everyone loved them,” Lafferty said.

“And corn on the cob. And more than enough bread,” Sheskey said. “Well, here’s hoping we’ll do okay this week.”

They would have two days to collect whatever food they could get. The pantry had an annual budget of \$70,000, mostly accrued from fundraising, but that money wasn’t enough to buy food for all the residents who sought their help.

Early on the first day, Lafferty climbed into the passenger's seat of an old, red pickup truck. Chase Brackley, who volunteers at the pantry, got behind the wheel, and the two men headed out to visit nonprofits, food banks and national chains that donate food as a matter of corporate conscience.

The route was the same each week, but what they would receive at each stop was undependable. There were no guarantees about how much food any organization would provide or whether they had anything to give at all. It was charity on a whim, based on conditions that the men inside the truck could not control.

The truck wasn't dependable, either. It was the same one that Sheskey's father used for decades to pick up food. Now, its transmission was failing and the truck jerked and chugged down a hill toward the first stop, a nonprofit that focuses on regional hunger issues and collects food for pantries.

"How's business today?" Lafferty asked a volunteer when he arrived.

"Pretty busy," the volunteer said. "We got a lot of people asking for food."

Lafferty held a clipboard, on which he scribbled notes about how much he was collecting. The previous week, the nonprofit had donated more than 100 pounds of food. This week, the volunteer pointed to one small box. Brackley peeked inside. There were some canned goods, pasta and jars of pickled jalapeños. Lafferty picked up the box and placed it on a scale. It weighed 32.5 pounds.

"That's all we have today," the volunteer said.

The two men climbed back into the truck and drove toward a Walmart that donates food it hasn't sold, cereal and snacks with imperfections on boxes, and meat nearing its sell-by date. Sometimes, the store provides the pantry's most desired items — fruits and vegetables — which is what the two men were hoping for when they pulled into the parking lot and walked into the cavernous warehouse.

"We're here for pickup," Lafferty said, holding his clipboard. The staff had boxes waiting from the meat locker. Then they carted out more boxes that came from the bakery — and that was it.

"No produce today," the warehouse manager said.

"Feast or famine, I guess," Brackley said.

Lafferty thanked them, and soon the two men were driving down a four-lane highway toward stop No. 3. They passed a squat, abandoned building with a sign that said, as a matter of aspiration, "CONVENIENCE STORE WANTED." Shirtless men sat on front porches near abandoned homes with brown-stained shingles. A gas station was shuttered. A thrift shop was boarded up.

"You know it's bad when the liquor store closes," Brackley said as he drove past a liquor store that had closed.

"Did you hear about the prison shutting down?" Brackley asked.

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"Yeah," Lafferty said, "that's another 50 jobs."

"This place," Brackley said. "This place. I don't know what's going to happen to it."

Lafferty said he saw things begin to shift about five years ago, when Gov. John Kasich's administration stipulated that single adults without children must work at least 20 hours a week if they want food stamps — and can receive food stamps for only three months every three years. The unemployment rate, which had hit 11 percent in early 2010, had been dropping as the economy improved, so Kasich (R) said the state should focus more on connecting residents with jobs than on providing unlimited assistance.

The intent, according to Cynthia Dungey, director of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, has been to instill a sense of self-sufficiency in a growing economy. She said that directing federal anti-poverty funds toward systemic issues, primarily education, is a better use of the money because poorer families will be more prosperous in the long term if children are better educated.

That may be the state's rationale, but a group of 12 local mayors in southeastern Ohio is contending that the plan keeps too much money for bills that don't yet exist. Across the country, at least \$5 billion in federal funds sent to help the poor sat in state reserves in 2017, federal data show, some \$500 million of it in Ohio. After the mayors found out about the unspent money this spring, they asked Dungey to release \$12 million so they could supply care packages filled with hygiene products for needy residents. That request remains under review.

Lafferty and Brackley could only wonder what money like that would mean for their county and for the pantry. As they continued their drive, they railed against how unfair they thought work requirements were in a place like Nelsonville, where there were few good jobs left and almost no public transportation options connecting residents to places that might have them.

"They would rather people go hungry than help," Lafferty said. "They say they have a heart for the poor, but they don't know how much people are struggling."

"It's cruel," Brackley said.

"Everyone around here sees it: People don't even have soap," Lafferty said. He thought about his wife's occasional trips to the Dollar Tree to buy hundreds of toothbrushes, tubes of toothpaste and tampons. "So Marg has to go out and buy it, because otherwise families won't get it."

The two stopped at a small Kroger grocery store, where they rely on getting large donations of bread. This time, they received three or four small boxes. They put it in the truck, drove back to the pantry and began unloading everything to see what this first day had brought.

They unpacked one of the boxes from Walmart. Inside were chicken feet, neckbones and thighs, and chunks of beef.

They opened another box. It was filled with Sam's Cola, some stray bottles of Arizona Iced Tea and three cans of La Croix sparkling water.

Another box: a white sheet cake with buttercream frosting and a strawberry cheesecake.

Another box: a pineapple upside-down cake, a German chocolate cake and parfaits in broken plastic cups.

Another box: a peach cobbler, a peach apple cobbler and a sweet potato cobbler.

"All sugar," Lafferty said.

They opened a box from Kroger. It was half full.

"That's all the bread we got?" Brackley said. "There's a bummer."

"No bread. No produce," Lafferty said. "Not a good start."

One day to go, and it began with promising news.

"Fresh produce available," read the subject line of an email.

The email came from the regional food bank, which usually sells food to the pantry at wholesale prices but occasionally gets donations from farmers. Watermelons, corn, tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, cucumbers, beets, radishes, zucchinis and yellow squash — all of it was free.

But then came the undependable part of food collection.

"Orders will be filled on a first-come, first served basis as always," the email read. It went out at 8:07 a.m., and neither Margaret Sheskey nor her husband were among the recipients. Instead, it went to Sheskey's sister, a volunteer at the pantry, who happened to see it around 9 a.m. She forwarded it to Sheskey, who at that moment was running errands and not checking email. By the time she saw the message, two hours had gone by.

She responded immediately, asking for tomatoes and onions and cucumbers. But it was too late.

"I only have a half-skid of tomatoes left," the food bank wrote back. It also had some watermelons and cantaloupes. But the other pantries had put in orders for everything else.

Lafferty and Brackley, meanwhile, were back at Walmart, where the manager pointed them to more boxes.

Ramen. Pinto beans. Pop-Tarts. Graham crackers.

"No produce?" Brackley asked.

"I know," the manager said.

"Can you go back and double-check?" Brackley asked. "There's got to be something."

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"I can try," the manager said, walking away toward the produce section.

"I'm not leaving without produce," Brackley said to Lafferty. "Call me indignant if you want. Watermelons are nice, but they're like the cherry on top. People need vegetables."

He sat down on a crate and rubbed his temples. Almost a half-hour went by. Finally, the manager returned holding what she was able to scrounge up, a few bags of limes.

"Thank you," Lafferty said, trying to sound more grateful than disappointed.

They drove to their last stop — the regional food bank — to pick up the order Sheskey had reserved. A man met them at the front gate.

"We're from Nelsonville," Lafferty said.

"We don't want to deal with y'all," the man replied, laughing.

The staff at the food bank liked to poke fun at Lafferty and Brackley. The last time the two were there, someone had written on a box of food set aside for them: "Nelsontucky." No one had explained what the word meant, and neither of them had asked. They had just laughed along with everyone else.

Now, though, after loading up some tomatoes and cantaloupes and laughing all over again with the staff about "Nelsontucky," Brackley was once again trying to focus on gratitude rather than disappointment. The word, though, continued to sting. His laughter had only been out of politeness.

"They're trying to say we're poorer than everyone," he said, as he and Lafferty headed back to the pantry. "But we are all struggling."

The truck jerked and chugged past farm fields while boxes of food jostled in the back of the truck. They got to the pantry, unpacked the boxes and the place began to smell like cantaloupes. Lafferty took a final tally of what they had received.

There were 17 boxes of beef and chicken — four fewer than they had received the previous week.

There were 32 boxes of bakery items, up from 16.

There were two boxes of beverages, down from four.

And there were three boxes of fruits and vegetables, down from 29.

All totaled, they had collected 1,432 pounds of food, down 507 pounds. A 35 percent decrease.

"We're short," Lafferty said. He predicted the same number of families would be coming as the previous week, if not more, and began wondering what else they could do.

Sheskey walked into the pantry carrying bags of hygiene products from the dollar store. She looked around.

"We're just a little low on everything," said. "It's not as much — but it will be good."

Just before the pantry was set to reopen, it began to rain.

No matter. By 11:40 a.m., three women were standing outside.

At 11:50, there were six people were on line.

At 11:55, there were 10. At the head the line were a woman and her teenage daughter who said they had run out of food stamps and had no food left in their house. Behind them was a man who said he was new in town and was told that the pantry was the best place to go for food.

A husband and his wife were not far behind him. They had six children and said the pantry was the only place in town where they could get something healthful.

Meanwhile, volunteers were inside, preparing. They put the dented boxes of graham crackers above the leftover cans of cranberry sauce, and set the bags of dried pinto beans below them. Packages of Pop-Tarts were put in a basket above the powdered milk, next to six bottles of Gatorade.

They set down cans of spinach and coconut milk that Lafferty had picked up at the last minute, and some eggplant and peppers that a local organization had left in a cooler he keeps outside of his house in case someone has something to donate. One shelf was jammed with desserts.


Item by item, shelf by shelf, Nelsonville's lifeline was revived.

At 11:59, the "CLOSED" sign was flipped to "OPEN," and the woman and her daughter rushed inside and grabbed an empty box. A volunteer put in some mac and cheese and chicken thighs from the freezer. The woman picked up five tomatoes and six peaches, one onion, six limes and a large watermelon. The box got so heavy she struggled to lift it. Then, another volunteer presented her with another bag, this one filled with soap and toothbrushes and a roll of toilet paper.

"You have no idea how much of a blessing this is," the woman said.

For a nonprofit in an impoverished town, another day had the makings of a success.

### **Robert Samuels**

Robert Samuels is a national political reporter who focuses on the intersection of politics, policy and people. He previously told stories about life in the District for The Post's social issues team. Follow 

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