



FOOD SECURITY STORIES

LIVE UNITED®

Battling the “Perfect Storm” of Food Insecurity

When you lose your job overnight, as thousands did in March and April of 2020, you focus on paying your rent and making your car payment. Food becomes the most “flexible” part of your very tight budget.

But you still have to eat. And if you have children, the groceries that used to last a week may only last three days, because your kids are home all day, no longer receiving school meals. When the economy ground to a halt during the COVID-19 pandemic, food quickly became a problem.

During the month of April 2020, Connecticut’s 2-1-1 Helpline received 826 calls for food assistance in Fairfield County, compared to 160 calls in April 2019. Food pantries were overwhelmed by demand. Meanwhile, panicked shoppers emptied grocery store shelves. Donations to pantries from the grocery store industry were down 70%. It was the “perfect storm” of food insecurity.

Through our partners in the **Stamford and Danbury Food Collaboratives**, and working with the **New Milford Food Bank**, we heeded the cries for help and responded. United Way of Western Connecticut provided more than **\$50,000** in mini-grants to **18** food providers across our region so they could purchase more food, collected more than **4,000** pounds of food and \$2,400 in monetary donations at our Northern Fairfield County Day of Action, and donated 1,200 pounds of food to the New Milford Food Bank.

Additionally, we expanded benefits and enrollment in our **Healthy Savings** program. More than 650 people are eligible to receive \$10 of free, fresh produce and other grocery discounts each week, just by swiping a card or using the app. More than \$70,000 in free, fresh produce has been provided to people in need through this innovative program that allows shoppers to choose the healthy foods they like at the grocery store.

For more information on how United Way of Western Connecticut helps struggling families obtain healthy food, go to www.uwwesternct.org/health

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Latesha Struggles to Provide Healthy Food, Despite Working Hard

Latesha and her husband live in Danbury and have two children in elementary school. They both work—Latesha works full time as a client manager at an accounting management company, and her husband works in the grocery industry. His hours vary and are unpredictable, but he typically works 20 to 30 hours per week.

Despite working hard, Latesha often depends on food pantries to feed their children. She said she has learned to make paying rent the number one priority in her budget, sometimes leaving her a little short on money for food. This was especially true when her husband was laid off of work for a period of time.

“I filled penny rolls and pawned jewelry to come up with the rent,” she says. Last year, her husband had to make a visit to the hospital emergency room, and they are still paying off the bill.

When COVID-19 closed her children’s school and her offices, Latesha found herself trying to juggle the demands of her job—conference calls, deadlines, communicating with clients—while also helping her children with their daily coursework, and assisting her kids when they had a meltdown or conflicts with each other.

“It was so stressful,” she said. “I often broke down and cried. I explained to the teachers and my boss that we had to take two days off for our mental health.”

She uses United Way of Western Connecticut’s Healthy Savings program to help her receive discounts on groceries, providing her with up to \$10 in free produce for every \$20 she purchases, in addition to discounts on other healthy foods. She also uses United Way’s ALICE Enrichment Fund to pay for out-of-school activities for her children.

Latesha and her husband count on United Way of Western Connecticut’s programs to make their lives just a little easier during a very stressful time. For more information on how we help struggling families obtain healthy food, go to www.uwwesternct.org/health

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