

## 'The need is now': Butler food drive helps feed 1,500



**DAN GIGLER**  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette  
[dgigler@post-gazette.com](mailto:dgigler@post-gazette.com)

APR 29, 2020

5:25 AM

Seventy-five volunteers were mobilized with masks on. Seventy-five thousand pounds of food was boxed, sorted and stacked at stations for distribution. And the cars were lined up 230 deep outside of the Big Butler Fairgrounds by 9:30 a.m.

So when the gates opened, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank was able to quickly serve 1,500 customers in two hours with two boxes of dry goods, produce, frozen meat, bread and milk — with drill-like efficiency.

That's fitting, as Charlese McKinney, the food bank's Network Development Director was running the show. A 12-year veteran at the food bank, she is also a U.S. Army Veteran, albeit as a pharmacy technician, though to watch her and her team work on a grey Tuesday morning

to shuttle cars through the gravel parking lot and load trunks, you'd think she'd been a high-ranking logistics officer.

Then again, the Food Bank has had enough practice at this point. Ms. McKinney said that they've distributed roughly 2 million pounds of food in Greater Pittsburgh at 15 large-scale distributions just in the six weeks since the COVID-19 crisis has shuttered businesses, pushed people to the unemployment rolls and created food insecurity issues here and nationwide.

Needless to say, this is not typical.

“Oh goodness, no,” she said. “We have distributions that draw large crowds. But it's a different kind of distribution. But we've been getting more efficient because we've been doing it and we can very easily scout a location and know what type of model will work best for this.”

A similar distribution event held just two weeks ago at Alameda Park in Butler helped 1,000 people, but the demand was so high that they had to turn people away.

This week Ms. McKinney and the food bank had the backing of the Butler County Alliance for Nonprofit Resources and the 40 volunteers from the Butler-based Friends of the Bantam Jeep Association, the organizers of the annual Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival in Butler, the birthplace of the Army vehicle-cum-American icon.

The annual event attracts thousands from across the nation. President Patti Jo Lambert said that the status of this year's festival — the 80th anniversary of the Jeep — is still up in the air, but they are not wavering on their commitment to the community. Since 2016, they've donated over \$160,000 to nonprofit organizations in Butler County, typically after their event.

“People are really lacking food because they haven't gotten their unemployment yet, they haven't gotten their stimulus, so we need to jump in,” she said.

“The need is now. Let's go all in and not just give money, but get our committee together and let's make this happen ... we came and said, ‘Put us to work.’”

*Dan Gigler: [dgigler@post-gazette.com](mailto:dgigler@post-gazette.com); Twitter @gigs412*