



# “THE PANDEMIC IS MAKING IT HARDER BUT IT’S ABOUT LIVING”: MUTUAL AID IN WEST PHILADELPHIA’S PROMISE ZONE

*By* Sojourner Ahebee

**O**n a brisk October morning Shante McLaughlin stood outside the former United Bank building at 37th and Lancaster in Philadelphia. Wearing a rainbow-colored face mask, she waited under the shelter of her large umbrella as the rain crashed down on the street, turning the long expanse of avenue to a dark grey. With the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing, she’s one of the many home health aides who risk their lives each day to care for some of the most vulnerable communities. And on Thursdays she and her elderly client make the trip to lower Lancaster Avenue to pick up fresh produce from the local emergency food hub.

They come with a mission.

“My client is a reverend,” said McLaughlin. “She finds out all the places where they’re giving out food and she’ll come get

food and . . . we give it away to people that's on our block that can't get out, that can't get nowhere, and we give it to them.”

Residents of West Philadelphia's Belmont neighborhood, McLaughlin and her client are a small yet mighty piece of the expansive mutual aid network keeping West Philadelphia afloat. As the pandemic moved through the city in late March, many lost their jobs, their ability to work. And the simple task of going to the supermarket quickly became a health hazard for those with already compromised immune systems.

James Wright, 39, is the director of Community and Economic Development at the People's Emergency Center (PEC), a West Philadelphia-based corporation working to respond to the needs of locals through affordable housing, food relief, homeless prevention, and a host of dynamic, year-round services aimed at protecting and nurturing a transforming community.

PEC is headquartered in the West Philadelphia Promise Zone, an Obama-administration designation meant to describe neighborhoods that have significant needs but also incredible assets like active civic groups, access to a plethora of public transport, and close proximity to thriving businesses and employers.

Wright says prior to the pandemic, his organization ran the emergency food cupboard from within one of PEC's transitional housing complexes. “But we didn't want outsiders coming in because we had residents living there,” said Wright. “So we turned the bank building into our emergency food hub.”

## **“The summertime was a time of plenty”**

Food banks have had to shift how they serve their communities

while adhering to social distancing mandates. Since March, food has been stored within the bank building, but all food dissemination happens outside in the adjoining lot where wooden picnic tables and brightly-colored concrete tiles adorn the pavement.

Food distribution is scheduled for 10 in the morning but residents begin lining up as early as 8:30. Open only once a week, there is a real incentive to be ahead of schedule because once the food runs out, residents won't be able to take advantage of the food cupboard until the following week.

Wright says the beginning of the pandemic brought a lot of bounty to food relief programs and organizations in the city. But several months into the global health crisis, a different story has unfolded.

“The summertime was a time of plenty and now it's getting a lot more restrictive,” said Wright. “In March there was just a ton of food that came to the table. . . . We were receiving calls from all kinds of businesses that wanted to redistribute or donate food.”

As the economy has opened up, food donations have dropped off dramatically. In March, PEC was moving upwards of 2,500 boxes of food each week to residents and families in need. Now that number is closer to 1,200 per week.

But the lines outside their food banks are still growing. And it's unclear how the need is going to be met.

## **Food-insecure seniors working together to feed the community**

PEC's emergency food hub is just one of the numerous food relief networks reaching residents in West Philly. During a typical year, the organization provided free food to three local independent

living facilities for seniors, a *masjid*, and a local elementary school. Now the masjid is closed and PEC staff are no longer allowed to enter the senior homes in an effort to prevent contact with elderly, immunocompromised residents. But seniors within these facilities are taking it upon themselves to get the job done.

“The senior buildings have just become a drop-off,” said Wright. “We just do bulk deliveries and there are a couple of seniors in the building who facilitate their own dissemination.”

Prior to the pandemic, these seniors were relatively independent and came in and out of the facility as they pleased. “But with the [super]markets and all the different vulnerabilities that come with [them], [seniors] ended up being kind of locked down in those facilities,” Wright explained.

Local churches have been a key player in responding to some of the pandemic-related needs. Eastern Outreach is composed of a network of 80 churches in Philadelphia that distribute 10,000 pre-cooked meals on Easter. In an effort to respond to a growing number of food-insecure seniors, they shifted away from the Easter model this year to pick up the slack.

“From March to July we had this church network that was helping us to disseminate 400 boxes, door to door, to seniors,” said Wright. “We worked with civic leaders to get a list of 50 to 100 people in the [local] neighborhoods who might have a really hard time getting to the supermarkets and we would deliver weekly boxes of food to them on their doorstep.”

## **Mantua, a changing neighborhood with multi-generational family roots**

Gwendolyn Morris, 70, has lived in West Philadelphia’s Mantua neighborhood for over 42 years. She came to the city to attend

college and settled in the area shortly after graduating. Though she's not a native, she has deep roots here and says that's not an uncommon quality of the many people who call Mantua home. "There are multiple generations of family connections here. . . . The grandmother may have lived here but the grandchildren live here now," she says with a smile ripening across her face. "And so you see vestiges of multiple generations of families that have lived in this community for 70, 80 years."

Morris, affectionately known in the neighborhood as Ms. Gwen, serves as the secretary of the Mantua Civic Association (MCA). Established in 2014 out of a desire in the community to preserve Mantua's rich history in the advent of rapid university-induced gentrification, residents formed the group as a way to actively participate in the transformative developments and changes that continue to sweep the area.

"It's a community that, by virtue of its location, I think is up and coming," said Morris. "Who wouldn't want to live in between the art museum and the Philadelphia zoo? Who wouldn't want to be able to walk to the Amtrak [train] station and be close to Center City? . . . [It's] the history and culture of this community our longtime residents are concerned about preserving while embracing the changing diversity."

While access to food has been one of the greatest concerns to arise out of the pandemic, access to information is a close rival. The dissemination of resources in the Promise Zone is highly dependent on the relationships that neighbors, civic organization leaders, block captains, and local residents have built with one another. There's a trust and a knowing that runs so deep here among residents. It's an energy like no other.

Morris and her small team of volunteers at MCA have been critical to food relief efforts in Mantua during the pandemic. When the School District of Philadelphia closed schools in early

April, the District organized meal sites at rec centers and public schools throughout the city for students who wouldn't be able to take advantage of free and reduced-price lunch programs while attending classes remotely from home. But MCA outreach coordinator Sam Samuel was presented with an obstacle: the closest food site was located at the Alain Locke School on Haverford Avenue, a few miles too far. "A lot of people down here, kids, couldn't go all the way up to 44th and Haverford to get it," said Samuel. "So I decided to go up there, introduce myself to the school lunch people and explain. So they allowed me to come pick up like 50 [meals]."

As the weeks progressed and word got out in the neighborhood that Samuel was running her own unofficial Mantua food delivery service, families began to depend on her to get their children fed each day.

"The more that people realized that their kids were gonna get these lunches because I was gonna deliver it to 'em, the volume went up and up as the weeks progressed," explained Samuel. "I was able to get guys from the community to go out early in the morning with me. I got a U-haul [and] we would go up and down the street, knock on doors and drop it off."

By the end of this effort, Samuel and her team were delivering upwards of 200 boxed meals to students and families in her neighborhood.

Samuel says people know her in the community as the unofficial fairy godmother of Mantua. "Me being here all my life, I know everybody," Samuel said, proudly. Samuel attributes her knack for community organizing to her grandmother, who helped to run a mutual aid organization called Mantua Planners back in the 1960s. "They helped people with utility bills, housing, clothes . . . so my grandmother inspired me to always want to help people."

## **“Our community assets, all right here”**

But Mantua residents will not ask just anyone for help. Samuel believes her ability to do the work she does depends on long-standing relationships and trust. “We have a senior building that’s up on 34th and Haverford,” said Samuel. “Usually if the seniors need something they’ll call me. I made sure they all signed up to vote and drove some of them to get COVID tested.”

But according to Morris, many of the Promise Zone elders live alone or in a single home, making it difficult to reach them and provide services. “Those are the people we rely on—neighbors or block captains and other organizations like our [Neighborhood Advisory Committee] who are there to really help folks connect with city services.”

When there are issues that arise that MCA doesn’t have the capacity to handle, they reach out to the local Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC) and pass on the task. NAC is a city-wide program that runs under Philadelphia’s division of Housing and Community Development. The city gives each NAC organization funding to do community organizing via an elected board. The People’s Emergency Center facilitated an election of the local neighborhoods in which NAC members were nominated and voted in by their peers to serve as advisory members to PEC.

Kevin Brown has served as the local NAC manager for five years. While he says food relief is the most dire need among Mantua residents amid the pandemic right now, he believes having intimate knowledge of the service area has been invaluable to the work of disseminating food itself.

“Doing this work you create partnerships, right?” asked Brown. “And so one of my colleagues, Curtis Stewart, he created this interactive map . . . on [PEC’s] webshare site [where] we

internally can see this map of all of our allies basically. Our community assets, all right here: this church, this store, this block captain, and within this many blocks they're gonna help us get the word out.”

While this work was already happening prior to COVID-19 in other forms, Brown said the pandemic required another level of engagement, another level of knowing and naming community. “You can really figure out how to cover your area that way and the interactive map was a really great way of formalizing something we were already doing.”

Standing outside the old bank building as rainwater collected in a puddle on the pavement beside her, Shante McLaughlin explained that without word from her block captain, she wouldn't have known about the food hub at 37th and Lancaster. Distressed by the recent police shooting of Walter Wallace Jr. in West Philadelphia's Cobbs Creek neighborhood, McLaughlin said that despite the unrest in the city, she's determined to care for her loved ones through it all.

“[The pandemic] is making it harder but it's about living. It's about living.”



*Commonwealth* is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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