



Pro Bono Q&A: Ecumenical Hunger Program (EHP)

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DLA Piper works closely with the Ecumenical Hunger Program (EHP) in East Palo Alto as part of the firm's signature pro bono project focused on fighting hunger. In the second in a series of Q&As spotlighting food banks across the country, we talk with Executive Director Lesia Preston about challenges the organization is facing during the pandemic and ways the community can help.

Tell us about your organization and the community you serve.

Lesia Preston: EHP was founded in 1975 and has since become the largest direct emergency food provider in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park.

Our mission is to provide material help, support services, and advocacy to families and individuals experiencing economic and personal hardship. EHP serves working families, seniors, people with limited incomes, and those who have both emergency and ongoing needs in East Palo Alto, Menlo Park and surrounding communities.

As a community, we work to meet the needs of our neighbors, both material and intangible. Our goal is to be more than just a social service agency that connects people to resources. We strive to build relationships that allow us to encourage, support and nourish individuals and families through difficult times. We fully understand the importance of providing life's essentials but aspire to a wider focus: the creation of a moral community of support that can provide hope to replace despair.

How has the pandemic changed your daily operations?

Lesia: We have temporarily closed all programs except for essential food programs. The demand for food resources has skyrocketed to historic levels and EHP staff members are working diligently to source and gather resources to meet the rising demand. Although distribution takes place Tuesday through Thursday, our staff is working seven days a week to make sure that food resources are located and brought back to the EHP campus in time for the mass distributions.

Food boxes are distributed using a drive-thru method. Staff members come in early to prepare and pack food boxes and then distribute the food as families drive through the designated service lanes. The line of cars waiting for food boxes measures miles long, but due to the carefully thought-out and well-organized distribution system, the line moves quickly and efficiently.

We're currently distributing approximately 1,000 bags of food per week. To put things into perspective, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the program distributed 1,500-2,000 boxes per month.

As we can no longer accept volunteers, staff members are wearing multiple hats which include sourcing food, picking-up and accepting fresh food donations, stocking the food pantry, packing food boxes, directing traffic and more.

What is the greatest need right now, and how should people reach out if they want to help?

Lesia: The greatest need is food. Our staff has been forced to get creative as resources from the local food bank are diminishing. The food banks are stretched thin which means that local organizations are not able to receive the critical resources they need. EHP staff members have been contacting local grocery stores, warehouse stores, restaurants, local farms and more, to ask if they can purchase critical supplies in bulk and if restaurants and farms can donate surplus supplies, rather than letting them go to waste. However, there is still a gap to fill and gift cards can help fill this gap. If we are not able to find key food resources in bulk (i.e. dairy, eggs, meat, etc.), with a gift card, EHP families can purchase food, essential toiletries and cleaning products at local stores.

With many families out of work and many not qualifying for government assistance, we are also concerned about those with health issues that need medication in order to survive. Gift cards to Costco, Walmart, Target and CVS can help families cover this critical need. Our families also need diapers (sizes 4, 5 & 6), baby wipes, and disinfectant sprays and wipes.