

# Editorial: For 25 years, People to People feeds Rockland

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**People to People, Rockland's largest food pantry, is marking 25 years of helping the community. As the need has grown, the nonprofit agency has expanded and diversified its programs to tackle the issues of food insecurity from every angle.**

People to People got its start in the 1970s, with Neil Lichtman and his family fulfilling Dear Santa letter requests. It wasn't officially a food pantry until 1989, when it established a three-room warehouse for storage and a soup kitchen in Haverstraw.

Now, the nonprofit is marking its 25th year aiding Rockland County's hungry. The face of hunger has changed in Rockland, as it has in America. The working poor, seniors and so many children struggle with food insecurity — that is, not knowing where they will find their next meal. People to People kept the signature Dear Santa program, now called [Project Joy](#). But it does so much more. Rockland's food pantry also helps supply [clothing to families](#), from babies' onesies to business attire for job seekers; helps provide [refurbished computers](#) to low-income families; runs its signature [Back to School With Dignity](#) program that [ensures children have essential items](#) so they can head back into the classroom ready to learn; and its [pantry](#) distributes hundreds of food packages each month to Rockland families,



Christine Metscher, right, a volunteer with People to People, gives Valerie Van Houten of Nyack her monthly supply of food from the food pantry at People to People in Nanuet on April 8. (Photo: File photo by Carucha L. Meuse/The Journal News)

People to People tackled the issue of hunger from every angle. With the obesity-nutrition paradox inflicting America's poor, the food bank participates in the [Plant a Row for the Hungry](#) program, which facilitates farmers, large and small, in donating fresh produce. English classes are offered. People to People officials don't shy away from discussing the bigger policy issues — education, job training, safe housing and affordable housing. "Hungry kids can't learn. And if kids can't get a good education, we'll be feeding them for the rest of their lives, too," Executive Director Diane Serratore said in a 2013 interview with The Journal News that addressed "food deserts" and "food insecurity" in the U.S.



In 2010, as the Great Recession still dragged on the county, People to People hosted the first-ever "Hunger Summit" at the IBM Palisades-Dolce Conference Center in Palisades, drawing about 100 people representing area nonprofits, different levels of government and places of worship. The organizations worked together to tackle Rockland's growing demand for food, the decline in funding and resources, as well as ways to operate more efficiently. "We get that we have to work together. We have finite resources. We have infinite need," Serratore said at the time.

In partnership with Nam Knights and the Rockland County Department of Veterans Affairs, People to People hosted "Veterans to Veterans," which allowed returning veterans a chance to visit the pantry, get job-search assistance and referrals to other social-services agencies. "Our younger veterans are not accessing the full range of services available to them. They're falling off the map after returning from Iraq and Afghanistan" Serratore said of the effort.

Even in the Lower Hudson Valley, hunger hits hard: [More than 10 percent of Rockland's 315,000 residents and about 20 percent of Westchester's 1 million residents go to bed hungry or without knowing where their next meal is coming from](#), according to advocates.

People to People has long documented the growing need in Rockland; its client list has almost tripled since 2008, and the agency adds programs to fill new needs. All the while, the Rockland community offered support. Houses of worship, Cub Scouts and Brownies, and motorcycle and cycling clubs have been constants in fundraising endeavors.

Stagnant wages and the region's steep living expenses feed the need. As it has for 25 years, People to People remains ready to offer food, support and dignity.

**MORE**

[People to People](#) holds a [luncheon to celebrate 25 milestones and 25 years](#).

**When:** Noon-2:30 p.m. Sept 19.

**Where:** Paramount Country Club, Zukor Road, New City

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