



Volunteers distribute food at a drive-thru distribution held by Harry Chapin Food Bank. SUBMITTED PHOTOS

HERE TO HELP

Residents turn to Harry Chapin Food Bank in their time of need

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Dace Vella was proud of never having to take any help from anybody in her life. Not when she emigrated from her native Latvia in 1995, after her country gained its independence from the former Soviet Union. Not when she landed in Canada, not knowing a word of English. Not when she got her visa and moved to New York State and not when she moved to Florida in 2007. ■ But she had no choice but to accept help recently, for the first time, at a drive-thru food distribution held by Harry Chapin Food Bank in Bonita Springs.

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Dace lost her job in the hospitality industry due to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Food bank

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Dace lost her job in the hospitality industry due to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. She worked in the restaurant at Shangri-La Springs, a spa and wellness center in Bonita Springs. Her last day of work was March 15. Even with the looming crisis of the coronavirus, when management came to her and her colleagues at the restaurant and told them they were shutting down, it was a shock. This month's bills will be covered, but next month is an unknown.

So she drove to the pantry at the Bonita Springs Lions Club. As she waited in her car, there was one overriding emotion: "Embarrassment. That's what I'm thinking," she said. She had always managed. There were some good times and some not so good times, but always, she managed.

Volunteers put a kit of nonperishable food, enough for about five days, along with some produce and bread, into her trunk. This is one of 12 food distributions per week held by Harry Chapin Food Bank, using the drive-thru method, to minimize contact and maximize social distancing.

Dace is actively applying for work. She became a U.S. citizen in 2002. She had worked as a certified kitchen and bath designer, learning the trade through her now ex-husband's busi-



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ness. When she moved to Bonita Springs in 2008 she began to freelance, doing some design work but also work-

ing at any job she could.

So she cleaned houses in upscale gated communities, served at dinner par-

ties, house-sat, drove couples to Florida's East Coast to take cruises, and managed home projects. All work is honorable work, she said. That's how she was raised. "Whatever I do, I do with pride."

The work ethic came from her parents in Latvia, who both passed away several years ago. They were a working-class family. She was taught that "any job is good – it doesn't matter." It's all well and good to be a lawyer or doctor but not everyone can be a lawyer or doctor, she said.

Dace doesn't have children, but her brother, his wife and two nephews live in Latvia. She brought her nephews here and put them through school. "All my life I helped my family," she said.

Dace now lives with her boyfriend who is still employed at the Bentley Village retirement community. But the future looks frightening. This pandemic is unlike anything else she's experienced. It's not like the impact of a hurricane, or the collapse of an industry.

"The whole country stops," she said. "I've never seen anything as bad as this hurting us."

She is grateful that Harry Chapin Food Bank is here to help.

For a calendar of drive-thru distributions, please go to harrychapinfoodbank.org and click on the coronavirus update. That will take you to a page with a list of links on the right-hand side to find food and other information.