Relief program aims to feed restaurant workers accustomed to feeding others

HOSPITALITY EVOLVES INTO A HUMANITARIAN EFFORT

BY TIM CARMAN

With a sack of fresh produce and a hot meal in hand, Kem Ramirez says he can't fathom how a restaurant can just give away food to hospitality workers who find themselves unemployed as the coronavirus wreaks havoc on their industry. Ramirez knows the food business perhaps better than most: He's the proprietor of the Freshmobile, which finds itself without a place to sell frozen limeade drinks now that Eastern Market has shut down weekend operations to food vendors.

"I can't believe people are giving away free food. I can't believe it. I think, 'Who are these people? Why are they doing this?'" says Ramirez, as he stands outside Succotash in downtown Washington. "I have a hard time processing that people are just giving away food for free."

Ramirez is one of thousands from a crippled hospitality industry taking advantage of the Restaurant Workers Relief Program, a multicity effort to support hourly employees (and even out-of-work owners) who are struggling to make ends meet as their income streams run dry. The program is a joint project from Marker's Mark and the Lee Initiative, a charitable organization formed by Edward Lee, the chef behind such restaurants as Succotash in Washington and 610 Magnolia in Louisville.

As the coronavirus shuts down more restaurants across the country, pushing millions of hourly earners into an unemployment system that's not ready to handle them, the Lee Initiative has added to its mission: The organization no longer just works to diversify the industry; it's feeding the industry. The Restaurant Workers Relief Program is now in Washington, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Louisville, New York and Seattle, with more cities in the works.

"Almost 90 percent of our lives is working in fancy food and arguing about the qualities of a sauce, but it's times like this when you realize that food is essential," Lee said. "Someone has to distribute it, deliver it, make it. There are people whose fridges are half-empty, and they're saying, 'I have enough food for three days, and I've got $400 in my bank account.' There's a reality of people going hungry."

The Restaurant Workers Relief Program is one of many ways the industry has been circulating the wagons to protect and support its own. The Restaurant Workers' Community Foundation has launched an emergency relief fund. One Fair Wage has created a workers support fund. Restaurant Opportunities Centers United is providing both direct financial assistance and access to numerous resources. More relief efforts are being added by the day, both large and small.

But downtown on F Street NW in Washington, where a small crew of volunteers and Succotash employees pass out food and household supplies, the huge need facing unemployed restaurant workers becomes painfully real. Inside the historic restaurant, with its soaring ceilings and Greek revival architecture, the tables normally reserved for diners are covered with the kind of products that Americans take for granted: diapers, baby food, pet food, soap, toothpaste, laundry detergent and, of course, toilet paper.

"That's gold right there," says Demitri Gilbert, general manager of Succotash, pointing out a box of toilet paper on the floor.

On the sidewalk, where folks in line to get a free meal and their pick of two household products, the first face to greet them may be Joe-Jo Jennings. Jennings is a manager at the Grill, a restaurant that, like Succotash, is under the umbrella of Knead Hospitality and Design. Jennings has been laid off, too, but he says he's fine. He has savings and family. His hourly wage colleagues are the ones he worries about. The people who worked two jobs and still lived paycheck-to-paycheck.

"We're being hit hard, so we need to help each other out any way possible right now," Jennings says.

Jennings is volunteering his time, like others at the relief program. It's a chance to support industry peers, in ways both tangible and intangible. Jennings doesn't ask the folks in line about their lives, and they don't provide any details. Jennings's job, he says, is to verify that people are restaurant workers and then extend them the hospitality that they have been providing diners for years.

"When people join us, there's not a sense of 'Woe is me,'" Jennings says. "It's like, 'Hey, welcome! This is for you. We love you!'

Ramirez, owner of the Freshmobile, is a prime example of a hospitality veteran with little in his own pantry. Like so many in the industry, Ramirez often eats at work. At the markets where he sells frozen drinks, fellow vendors will share food with him. At home, Ramirez figures, he has coffee a friend gave him, some spices and the groceries he has picked up at Succotash. "I do have cereal and milk," he adds.

Food is not even Ramirez's main concern. "Our biggest worry is how we're going to pay our rent," he says. His partner "suggested that I call my student loans to see if they can lower the interest rate."

Jason Berry, co-founder of Knead Hospitality, is acutely aware of the suffering that the coronavirus outbreak has caused in his industry. His company has laid off about 385 workers at four restaurants so they could collect
unemployment. Maker's Mark is footing much of the relief program costs, for at least two weeks in all cities, but in Washington, Knead has also contributed food and staff time to the cause. Outside vendors and businesses have also donated produce and supplies, which Knead is either turning into hot meals or passing along directly to those in line, Berry says.

“We're trying very hard to do some good and find some positivity in all this nonsense,” Berry says. “This is devastating. I can't even fathom how we're all going to come back from this.”

Yet, despite the company's efforts to give back to the community, Berry and Knead have had to field a common question: Why don't you just keep paying your employees?

“I'm like, 'Do you want me to be able to reopen? This is a cash-flow business!,'” Berry says. “How do I reopen if we drain all of our bank accounts? It's a thin-margin industry.”

Since the relief program launched last week, Succotash's skeleton kitchen crew has been cranking out 200 to 300 meals a day, including eggplant Parmesan and seafood puttanesca, not exactly wartime rations. Berry is surprised more people haven't taken advantage of the free food and supplies (available daily from 5 to 8:30 p.m. daily). The lines have been modest at best. But he suspects the reality has not sunk in yet. Once the next pay period rolls around and there's no check for workers, both Lee and Berry suspect there will be more need, which is why they are looking for more funding to extend and expand the relief program.

“That reality is going to set in really fast,” Lee says.

At present, though, there are days when the Succotash crew doesn't pass out all the meals. When that happens, someone will take the leftovers and hand them out to homeless people, which is sometimes easier said than done. Last week, Jennings drove around Washington, looking for people living on the streets. He couldn't immediately find any. So he drove to a nearby park, where homeless people had gathered. They were thankful for the hot food, he says, save for one man who scoffed at the eggplant parm.

“One gentleman says, 'Is there any meat in there?' I said, 'No, it's vegetarian,'” Jennings says. “He says, 'I don't want that.' I turn to walk away, and he goes, 'Give it to me, give it to me, give it to me!'”

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TOP: Daisy Ramos of Knead Hospitality and Design hands supplies over to Joe-Jo Jennings, manager of the Grill at the Wharf in Washington.

ABOVE: Bags of produce sit on the bar at Succotash waiting to be handed out with an evening meal for out-of-work restaurant employees.