

# As people lose jobs during pandemic, townships preparing for increased aid, food requests

By STEVE SCHERING

PIONEER PRESS |

APR 04, 2020 | 7:00 AM



Local townships in Oak Park, River Forest and Leyden are preparing to increase mental health and food assistance services as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. (Steve Schering / Pioneer Press)

Townships are getting ready for the heightened needs of people who have lost paychecks during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they are having to offer help while adhering to social distancing practices. That means they're changing the way they deliver services, such as giving clients sack meals in a parking lot rather than having them come inside a building.

## **Oak Park Township**

With millions filing for unemployment last month, Oak Park Township is preparing to offer additional food deliveries and general assistance to needy residents.

General assistance administrator April Dugal said general assistance is available to people between 18 and 62 years of age who live in Oak Park and have no income and no minor children. General assistance provides financial help to those who do not qualify for any federal or state assistance programs.

“If you’ve exhausted your unemployment benefits, you can come on general assistance,” Dugal said. “I don’t see clients in-person anymore, but I’m doing everything over phone and email. If someone needs to apply, they can do it over the phone.” Information about general assistance is available at [www.oakparktownship.org](http://www.oakparktownship.org) and at 708-383-8005.

Senior services have also shifted as in-person meetings are discouraged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Senior services director Pamela Mahn said the township is still offering all of its typical services, though delivery of those services have changed.

“We’re answering calls like we normally do and able to direct callers to specific program areas, Mahn said. “We have a vulnerable population that’s not all at the same stage of being comfortable with technology. We have to meet them where they are.”

Mahn said the township is hoping to launch a virtual memory café sing along, a digital adaptation of one of its popular in-person programs. With its senior dining room closed, staff is focusing more on delivering meals to limit face-to-face contact.

“We do have the ability to deliver meals to homebound residents and provide to-go meals for residents who normally come in and have lunch,” Mahn said. “When older adults come on-site, we’re distributing meals in the parking lot. We’re working to get

more of a drive-through process.” Oak Park seniors needing assistance can call 708-383-8060.

In addition to adult and senior services, township officials are also preparing to assist local young people with stresses brought on by COVID-19. Oak Park Township’s youth interventionist program is still up and running, and officials transitioned to a “tele-health” model.

“We’ve received multiple requests asking if we were accepting new clients, and we are,” youth services director Megan Traficano said. “The interventionists will be able to conduct assessments over the phone. Younger students, we’re more talking to families to see how we can support them in this time of need.”

Traficano said things such as school closures and stay-at-home orders have had a noticeable effect on young people, especially with events like prom and graduation now up in the air.

“We’ve seen greater anxiety and depression with our youth,” Traficano said. “Their world has changed in a matter of hours when school got canceled. They can’t see any of their friends and sporting events and extracurriculars stopped. Youth are really disappointed and not really knowing how to deal with this right now.”

Youth in Oak Park and River Forest seeking assistance can also take advantage of an anonymous text line to connect with a social worker.

Young people needing to speak with a social worker can do so anonymously through Support4U by texting on their phones. Oak Park District 97 students seeking assistance can text “HOPE” to 844-670-5838, while River Forest District 90 students can text “SAFE” to the same number. OPRF High School students seeking social worker services should text the word “CARE.”

“Within three minutes, a social worker responds to the text to see how they can meet

their needs,” community mental health board member Vanessa Matheny said. “If that social worker deems they need additional support outside of texting, they will have information on resources available in the community.”

## **River Forest Township**

Residents living in River Forest may find similar or shared services with Oak Park Township, according to River Forest Township Supervisor Carla Sloan.

“We view our communities as one community,” Sloan said.

Sloan said staff in River Forest is also delivering meals to the homes of seniors, while the township is shifting to a pick-up option as well.

“We’ve moved into shelf-stable and frozen meals to allow those to last longer,” Sloan said. “...We’re getting a lot of meals out to Oak Park and River Forest residents.”

Sloan said the township’s senior bus service, which used to take seniors to grocery stores and medical appointments, has been repurposed to helping other agencies, such as Housing Forward and Beyond Hunger.

River Forest Township has also shifted its social worker services to phone and video conferences, with Sloan saying the need for youth services has increased.

A partnership with the village of River Forest has also led to more than 100 volunteers signing up to help deliver food and run errands for seniors in the community.

“Demand for meals has gone up as seniors are less able to get food and cook for themselves,” Sloan said.

River Forest seniors seeking township assistance can call 708-383-8060, while youth services are available by calling 708-622-8535.

## **Leyden Township**

All Leyden Township buildings have been closed since March 13, however, the township is actively working to increase its scope of services.

Township administrator Greg Ignoffo said its meals on wheels program has “expanded greatly,” while its operations have shifted to more phone and digital options.

“We no longer allow the public to come in for [food pantry] pickup. It’s by appointment only,” Ignoffo said. “Patrons will reach out to our human services staff and they will take that information to set up a time to meet them.”

Ignoffo said those needing deliveries will receive a bag of food and “typical necessities,” when available.

“It’s a little tough getting supplies,” Ignoffo said. “We’re looking at many different areas to keep our shelves stocked.”

To prepare for increased demand, Ignoffo said the township has brought in a new larger refrigerator and a new large freezer. The township is also expanding into its former landscape garage to increase food storage space.

“We are in the process of pushing that completion sooner rather than later as we expect the next weeks and months to see that need grow,” Ignoffo said. “It will give us greater flexibility. I’m hopeful we’ll be using the new food pantry by the end of the month.”

Ignoffo said he’s also working to increase funds to assist those needing general financial assistance. “We’re getting inquiries about utilities and I’m starting to see that ramped up,” Ignoffo said. “People are panicking and we need to concentrate on those essential services.” Those needing to access the Leyden Township food pantry can email [info@leydentownship.com](mailto:info@leydentownship.com) or call 847-455-8616.

*sschering@pioneerlocal.com*

*Twitter: @steveschering*