

MASSACHUSETTS Lawyers Weekly

Milford lawyer, others ramp up meals program for school kids in response to COVID-19

By: Kris Olson November 19, 2020



Michael W. Kaplan poses with young volunteers for the Milford Area Humanitarian Coalition meals program in the pre-pandemic era.

About seven years ago, Michael M. Kaplan recognized a need in his “wonderfully diverse” community of Milford, where he maintains a Main Street law office.

While Milford is a relatively small town — population approximately 28,000 — its challenges are a “microcosm of a big city,” Kaplan says.

Among those challenges is that the most nutritious meal some students get daily during the academic year is their free or subsidized school lunch, meaning that for the three months of summer break, there’s a void in these students’ lives.



Rows of bags of food are ready to be picked up by those benefiting from the Milford Area Humanitarian Coalition meals program.

Kaplan, then president of the local Rotary Club, decided to marshal the resources to fill that void. Soon, the Milford Area Humanitarian Coalition, a full-fledged 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, was born.

The effort brought together local churches and groups such as the Rotary, Lions Club and Salvation Army, some of whom may have already been preparing meals as a community service but not on a coordinated basis.

As a pilot program in its first year, the MAHC served 2,200 meals, which it considered a promising start. It then forged a key strategic alliance with the Hockomock Area YMCA, which provided access to a grant writer.

By securing funding, the MAHC was able to hire a coordinator to wrangle the program's 180 volunteers.

Working with Carla Tuttle, director of food and nutrition services at the Milford Public Schools, MAHC was also able to go from providing simple box lunches to diversifying its menus with a bit of cultural flair.

While the effort began by serving lunch only, it eventually added breakfast as well and also came to operate as a mini day camp of sorts, staying open for a couple of hours each day and offering programs, such as arts and crafts or games.



By utilizing the purchasing power of the Milford Public Schools, the MAHC meals program is able to buy supplies like Cheerios in bulk.

One day, Red Sox mascot Wally the Green Monster would visit. Another, the fire department would provide some of its vehicles for a touch-a-truck event.

"People would not just come get a meal and leave," Kaplan says. "It fostered being with your neighbors and building community."

In its first six years, the program served 47,000 meals. If the story ended there, it would be impressive enough.

But as we know, the world changed in March, with schools, including those in Milford, shifting to remote instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All of a sudden, the need for the summer meals program was arriving months ahead of schedule. Kaplan says the school system knew it was making "quite a tall request," asking for an effort that usually involves months of planning meetings to reactivate immediately.



MAHC meals program volunteers fill bags for participants to pick up.

But Kaplan and the rest of the MAHC leadership got right to work. Before long, a "grab and go" version of the meals program was ready to welcome its first parade of cars.

"The community knew there was a need, but we did not know the extent," Kaplan says.

While the original meals program was designed for children, the MAHC leadership knew that COVID-19 had brought with it business closures and layoffs. So, one choice they made was to say that any caregiver who accompanied a child to pick up a meal could get one as well.

MAHC also realized that the need for meals would not end on Fridays. In response, it developed a “backpack program” that would provide enough meals to stretch from Friday night until Monday morning.

The program that had provided 47,000 meals over the course of six years wound up providing more than 105,000 in the six months between the middle of March and September, when schools reopened.

Such a massive effort required money, and the need to do fundraising was constant, Kaplan says. But MAHC got tremendous support for its telethon and radiothon, with other news outlets, including the local newspaper, the Town Crier, helping to spread the word.



“For people to rally and do what they did was amazing,” he says. “Sometimes, the worst of times brings out the best in people.”

Kaplan was also heartened recently to learn from his cousin, a librarian in the town of Oxford, that MAHC was being used as a template to establish a similar program there. He considers the imitation to be the highest form of flattery, as the old cliché goes.

Kaplan says he decided to share his story with Lawyers Weekly in the hopes of bringing to a wider audience a message he shared not long ago at his 30th law school class reunion.

While fresh law school grads will often have all they can do to get their practices established, most lawyers will eventually get to a point in their careers where they have built their reputations and relationships, and have some influence in their communities.

Kaplan urged his classmates — and is now encouraging the broader legal community — to use that clout to address pressing needs, whether on the other side of the world or right in their backyards.

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