

Community Pantries: Responding to COVID-19 Food Insecurity

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Letter to the Editor

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Food insecurity is a critical public health issue. The disruption of food intake due to lack of money or other resources is significantly associated with income, age, and homeownership status. Even before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the number of people experiencing food insecurity in the United States increased.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic caused a global economic slowdown and put more than 265 million people at risk of hunger and malnutrition.²

In the Philippines, quarantine measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 caused a labor market crisis. The loss of jobs contributed to almost 7.6 million Filipinos experiencing hunger during the pandemic.³ There were efforts by the national government to ease the living situation of the vulnerable populations and sectors. However, the *ayuda* (financial assistance) are few and far between. In some cases, the social amelioration program fell short in providing much-needed relief.⁴

Moved by the Filipino value of *malasakit* (concern for others), a Filipino entrepreneur started the first community pantry in the Philippines during the pandemic. Located on *Maginhawa* (Convenient) Street in Quezon City, the service provided free food to locals suffering from food insecurity. It is guided by the tenet “Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan; kumuha batay sa pangangailangan” (Give what you can; take what you need). The *Maginhawa* Community Pantry is anchored on the Filipino values *kagandahang-loob* (kindness) and *hiya* (sacrificial self-control of one’s individual wants for the sake of other people).⁵ In this time of crisis, the community pantry is a testament to the Filipino spirit of *bayanihan* (cooperative undertaking) and an act of solidarity with the poor and suffering. The concept of community pantry resonates with the basic human values of faith, hope, compassion, and accountability. As such, it is unsurprising that various communities, non-government organizations, educational institutions, and parishes have also implemented a similar service during this time of crises.

The community pantry is not without criticism, foremost of which is its sustainability. While it is true that the longevity of the service is something worth pondering on, the community pantries are a timely – albeit imperfect – response to the quotidian needs of the people. A developing country that is reeling from the impact of the pandemic, the community pantries, to some extent, counter malnutrition, death, and criminality. If not addressed, such issues can compound and present a more significant threat to public health even after the country has prevailed over COVID-19.

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