

## Guest Column: The Early Shift

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(PIXabay)

**The number of people served by Kosher Meals on Wheels is constantly changing, influenced by politics and public policy, communal ability and individual needs.**

This was definitely not the volunteer opportunity that was advertised. As my alarm rang at 4:30 a.m. the day before Rosh Hashanah to pack food, my first thought was this is the craziest hour of the day. My second thought was I am excited to see and pack food with my “Shabbat Crew.”

I have been an active volunteer in the Detroit Jewish community for several years. I have had the privilege of having a wide variety of volunteer opportunities and board affiliations. Never did I expect packing food to be one of my most valuable, meaningful and educational volunteer experiences.

On March 12, 2020, the world suddenly stopped. My two children, ages 13 and 16, were now home for what turned out to be the rest of the school year of virtual school. My husband’s office abruptly closed, and he was going to be working from home for the foreseeable future. All activities suddenly ceased, and everyone was under a stay-at-home order. As an active

person who craves stimulation and activity, this was not the most ideal situation.

I am on the executive committee of the board of Jewish Family Service of Metropolitan Detroit (JFS). In one of our first Zoom meetings in March, it was announced that Kosher Meals on Wheels (KMOW) needed volunteers to both pack and deliver food. KMOW is a program run by both the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and JFS. The program provides food, with daily delivery Monday-Friday, for homebound adults. When COVID-19 began, the number of older adults who were homebound grew. Prior to March 2020, KMOW serviced about 50-60 families per week. By June 2020, that number more than doubled to nearly 155 families.

On April 3, I went to the Jewish Community Center, at 6:30 a.m. to pack meals. There were four people there, all of us masked and in different corners of the large social hall. I didn't tell my parents or my friends. I didn't want them to worry about me being inside somewhere other than my house. We met early at the JCC because the volunteers who deliver the food come to pick up the food at 8 a.m.

I began to pack twice a week: Wednesdays and Fridays. Wednesdays were easy; we packed lunch and dinner. Fridays were a little more chaotic because we packed meals for the whole weekend, including a Shabbat dinner with soup and dessert, a Saturday Shabbat lunch, and frozen meals for Saturday and Sunday.

As it turns out, two of the things that I least expected and found most rewarding were making friends and being inspired. My "Shabbat Crew" arrives at 6 a.m. to pack and 5:15 on days when we are packing for extra days for a holiday like Passover or Rosh Hashanah. We laugh under our masks together, tell stories and have gotten to know each other well over the past seven months. For a long time, besides our immediate families, this was the only "social" outlet we had. I have been inspired by the dedication of two volunteers from the NCJW who come to the JCC every single morning. They prepare at home every evening for the next day's deliveries, labeling bags and confirming the clients on the delivery schedule for the next day. These women have arrived at 6 a.m. every morning for years. In my different volunteering pursuits, I have rarely seen firsthand such complete love and dedication to a cause.

Both the delivery drivers and packers are vetted by Jewish Family Service. I've also had the opportunity to make deliveries. The older adults who receive the food are so grateful, and the driving volunteers are generous and kind, knowing that for many of the KMOW recipients, the delivery person may be the only person they see and talk to each day.

This work also has the additional benefit of witnessing how federal and state funding affects individuals and families. At the beginning of COVID-19, there was an influx of money to help the homebound adults. The number of older adults who fell under the definition of

homebound increased during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, the recipients of the meals did not receive a Shabbat lunch for Saturday. Now there were extra funds to help with an additional meal.

Then, toward the end of the summer, funds began to get cut, and so was Shabbat lunch. In addition, some of our older adults either no longer needed the service or no longer qualified. The number of people served by KMOW is constantly changing, influenced by politics and public policy, communal ability and individual needs.

***Mara Moss** is a volunteer and on the Executive Committee of the Board of Jewish Family Service, associate chair of Jewish Women's Foundation of Metropolitan Detroit and on the Board of Women's Philanthropy of Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit. She lives in Bloomfield Hills.*

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