

# The Paniversary — SOMA Community Supportive During COVID Crisis but 'It's not Getting Back to Normal'

By HEATHER KAYS  
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People tend to reveal their true selves during a crisis. That truth is evident in the astounding number of South Orange and Maplewood volunteers and charitable organizations to form and respond to community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Robin Peacock, executive director of MEND Hunger Relief Network, which supplies local food pantries and helps the hungry, said her organization has assisted at least four times as many people as they did pre-COVID. In response to this unprecedented crisis, MEND accelerated their plans to expand from a two-year plan to a three-month plan.

"There was a huge disruption in the supply chain and there was a greater need," said Peacock, adding that monthly meetings with food pantries became weekly and just recently went to two a month. "We've always been good listeners to our pantries, but we stepped up our game on that as well."

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In addition to the number of clients increasing overall, there has been a significant increase in first time clients or "newly hungry" according to Peacock.

"We've been very good responding to the need of the food pantries," said Peacock, noting that Mend has partnered with several organizations to reach those in need including the United Way.

"That's what's kept us going through this," said Peacock, referring to the increased number of donations MEND has received during COVID. "It's been a bit of roller coaster in terms of the emotion of it."

Peacock said for every request of help her organization receives she checks the mail and there is a new donor stepping up to help.

"I think people have risen to the occasion for sure," Peacock said. "A lot of people are looking for ways to help right now and we've benefited from that generosity. It has been wonderful to see that kind of response from the community."

Mend is still in need of assistance, Peacock said.

"I think people are more aware now, but I always encourage people to reach out if they want to support these efforts," Peacock said. "You may be surprised at what hunger looks like. It could be your neighbor down the street, someone you work with, it's impacting more people than ever."

At the height of the PPE crisis related to COVID, several people who had 3D printers in the South Orange and Maplewood area wanted to help frontline workers. This led to the founding of the SOMA NJ 3D Printers Alliance. Jake Ezzo founded a Facebook group to connect everyone in early March.

"The entire face shield effort was funded through community fundraising," said Zubin Kremer Guha, a freshman at Yale University.

There was a core group of five coordinators working to meet demands within the community.

"By the time we stopped operations in August 2020, the group of nearly 40 members had printed and delivered 48,000 face shields to hospitals, healthcare providers, and essential workers," said Guha. "The most rewarding part of the experience was getting thank you cards and photos from frontline workers using our shields. As the numbers grew, it became harder and harder to understand the impact the group was having, and these messages made us want to keep going."

The impact of these organizations and others including the SOMA Squad which matches up those in need with local volunteers who can help them have had an enormous impact on those struggling financially and those working in healthcare.

Maplewood resident Jane Ehlers recently spoke about the effect of these efforts last Sunday at [the memorial for those who passed](#) from COVID locally. Ehlers entered the nursing field at a local hospital in May 2019.

"I got into health care for the same reason many people got into health care to help people get better and reach the full capabilities of their health," the 24-year-old told the crowd gathered at twilight around the South Orange duck pond. "That quickly became a far reality [on] March 23 of 2020. I became stationed on the COVID unit, and it quickly became a different priority than trying to help people get better. We quickly ran out of PPE — masks, gowns, suits — and that's when I started to realize the full love that this community showed to everyone around us."

"I went into the hospital not knowing what I would encounter that day, but I knew that I would be safe because this community protected me," Ehlers said. "I went in with an N-95 [mask] from someone on DeHart Street, a Tyvek suit from someone on South Orange Avenue, a gown from someone on Lenox Place and tons and tons and tons of face shields. And I knew quickly that I would not be helping people get better but helping them pass. And that became a harsh reality. I'm just here to tell you that no one passed alone, and no one is forgotten. It was really, really hard time."

Other ways the community helped each other and the surrounding areas was through more than 500 volunteers [sewing and donating 15,000 masks](#) and mask extenders, and forming the Facebook group [SOMA Squad-SOMA Quarantine Assistance](#), Delivered to connect those who needed an item, a task done, or an errand run with those who were able to offer help.

Despite the beautiful outcome and outpouring of support in the SOMA community, more donors and volunteers are still needed.

"Unfortunately, it's not getting back to normal," said Peacock. "There are some short-term solutions. We're still running at much higher numbers and I think that will last for a while. There's a lot more work to be done. Overall, it is getting better but we're not through this yet. "

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