With volunteer drivers staying home, Health Trust CEO jumps behind the wheel to deliver meals to those in need

Michele Lew: 'It was a monumental task that required all hands on deck.'

by Linda Taaffe / Palo Alto Weekly

It was about 10 p.m. on a Wednesday night during the first days of the stay-at-home order when Palo Alto resident Michele Lew decided to look through her work emails before retiring for the night.

That's when she discovered that about half of her regular pool of 36 volunteer drivers who were to deliver meals to hundreds of older and homebound adults served by The Health Trust Meals on Wheels program the next morning had canceled. It was a moment that she describes as "mayhem."

Most of the drivers, she explained, were retirees and needed to stay at home under the order.

As CEO of The Health Trust, which has operated the free home-delivery meal program in Santa Clara County for the past 20 years, Lew had to get creative — and quickly — to fill the void, especially since demand for meals had more than quadrupled since the order took effect.

The program, which delivers hot meals every week day and frozen meals for the weekends, is a lifeline for people who cannot cook or get around, she said.

"It was a monumental task that required all hands on deck," said Lew, who after a few frantic late-night text messages, was able to assemble an emergency delivery team that included herself.

And so while most others were adjusting to working behind a desk at home, Lew found herself adjusting to working behind the steering wheel of her car. The next morning, Lew cleaned out her trunk and left her Palo Alto home to drive her first-ever Meals on Wheels delivery route.

"It's been seriously the highlight of my pandemic life," she said during a telephone interview earlier this month. "It was a chance for me to see firsthand what it is like to deliver meals and get to meet some of the clients."

The work, she said, is more than just transporting food from one place to another. Each meal comes with a specific set of delivery instructions: Some people want their meals left at a certain location in the house; others have pets that can't be let out the door.

"Each morning Meals on Wheels drivers get their route with instruction sheets and individual notes for each client," she said. "So if that day you're serving oranges, and the client can't eat oranges, then you need to make sure you're packing another fruit for that particular client. … Trying to figure out all that, my hat's off to the veteran drivers."

During the pandemic, the drivers also must follow additional safety precautions, like changing their gloves after each delivery and making sure they sanitize before and after they leave a client's house, she added.

Lew said being able to meet the clients that her nonprofit serves has had a lasting impact. She talked about how one delivery to a bedridden senior has particularly stuck with her.

"He left his door unlocked so I could deliver the meal into his home," she said. "When I left, I wondered if he just leaves his door unlocked all the time, and whether he's safe. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the house, and I thought this could be the only food that he is getting. The whole experience was very sobering."

Lew said the biggest challenge as a first-time driver was not knowing exactly where to park.

"With the shelter-in-place, there are a lot more cars parked on the roads and so finding a place to park and then get out of the car and deliver the meal was one of the most challenging parts," she said.

Lew said she delivered meals to about six households during her three-hour shift.

"Some of our veteran drivers can probably do about 42 deliveries a day," she said. "I can definitely see the benefits of having veteran Meals on Wheels drivers with a routine route."

In the week before the stay-at-home order took effect, the nonprofit delivered about 2,200 meals a week to older and homebound adults throughout Santa Clara County. By the first week of April, they were delivering 9,200 meals, Lew said.

"It is a giant job. And we feel very lucky so far," Lew said. "We've been able to provide meals to everyone who has requested and needed them, but as we look out to the future, we're getting more nervous that at some point we will hit a ceiling."

Lew said donations also have increased since the coronavirus outbreak, but the challenge is that they haven't increased at the same rate as meal requests.

"We don't expect when the pandemic is over that everyone will be food secure, so we are thinking about long-term plans as well," she said.
To fill the void while handling the uptick in demand and a decline in drivers, she said, staff members are working longer hours, and The Health Trust has redeployed staff from other departments to focus full-time on Meals on Wheels.

The city of San Jose also has provided financial support for a pilot program with DoorDash drivers who cover weekday deliveries to homeless residents who have been relocated to motels during the pandemic.

"We really scrambled that first week," Lew said.

Now with 20 drivers and help from DoorDash, the nonprofit has been able to meet its delivery demands, she said, and she hasn't been called back to fill another route — yet.

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Week 4:
• Pushing through exhaustion, fear: Stanford Hospital researcher faces new reality caused by health crisis

Week 3:
• Man goes extra mile to help vulnerable residents during pandemic, sparking growing corps of volunteers
• Not even catching polio in the 1940s compares to COVID-19 pandemic, local woman says

Week 2:
• Despite financial strain, restaurant owner insists on providing free meals in the community that helped him succeed

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