



Seth Hisman, 20, of Chaplin, offers food to a Covenant Soup Kitchen client during their lunch program recently. Operations at the soup kitchen have changed drastically since and students are now studying from home. To the right is ECSU Rugby Coach Ray Aramini, a veteran soup kitchen volunteer. TNS

Soup kitchen gets help from ECSU students

LORI RILEY
HARTFORD COURANT

WILLIMANTIC — While some college students on spring break were spread across Florida beaches, Eastern Connecticut State University junior Seth Hisman was spending his break at the Covenant Soup Kitchen in Willimantic.

Four to six hours a day, when he wasn't working at his job at Staples, Hisman, 20, of Chaplin was driving to local package stores to look for boxes in which to pack groceries for needy families.

He was helping to sanitize the facility.

Hisman was worried about whether there would be enough cereal in the soup kitchen's pantry.

He's a member of Eastern's rugby club, which has a long history of helping at the soup kitchen, led by its assistant coach Ray Aramini, a member of the board of directors.

The team members recently put out a plea to Eastern rugby alumni for donations. They raised \$1,000 in 48 hours.

"I've always been involved here and there when they need extra help, but since Eastern is going to online classes, I have an abundance of free time," said Hisman, an accounting major.

"I knew Ray could use the help, I knew the soup kitchen needed the help because they have to go through all these changes. You have to have people to do the grunt work."

"Right now, the real need is just having food in the building. Canned fruit, canned vegetables, rice, cereal. We're really low on cereal."

Many of the facility's volunteers are older and more at risk of catching the coronavirus, so they are staying home.

The facility needs to be cleaned and sanitized more

often. At first, only 12 people were allowed into the dining room at a time to maintain social distancing and only people who are homeless are allowed to come inside, while others must take a meal in containers.

Since then, operations have changed and there are fewer volunteers as students are now home taking online classes.

Food is distributed outdoors at the nearby Kramer Middle School site, with indoor dining taking place in the more spacious former school building.

"We are building the plane as we fly it," said Kimberly Clark, the executive director of the soup kitchen. "It's been a challenge. We're committed to as long as we can do it, we'll do it."

The food pantry, which has staples such as canned goods and cereal, has been relocated.

"It's very labor-intensive," Clark said. "We are having to buy more food. Our needs have quadrupled in a week."

Since Eastern is closed and the students are taking classes online, many of Hisman's rugby teammates are not in the area, so it's hard for all of them to help as much as they usually do.

But Aramini is getting daily calls from players who want to help.

Aramini is trying to spread the players out, telling them that this will be "a marathon, not a sprint."

Hisman said working at the soup kitchen puts a lot of things in perspective, especially now.

"Honestly it makes it so much easier to handle this when you see the types of things you do at the soup kitchen," he said.

"Because we're all worried about washing our hands

extra, we're worried about this person might be sick, that person might be sick, when these people are worried about having food for dinner tonight.

"The virus to them is second to: It's snowing right

now, where are they going to sleep?"

"Seeing people with much greater needs brings you back to earth and centers you and you realize we're going to get through this."

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