

Volunteers fill gaps amid UK pandemic lockdown



The Rev. April Keech, an Anglican priest, who organizes food deliveries to old and vulnerable people, gestures after dropping off food to a woman in London, Saturday, March 28, 2020. Keech and her team of volunteers have spent the past two weeks buying groceries, filling prescriptions and making deliveries to residents in east London who are at risk of serious illness or death from the COVID-19 disease. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for

most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)



Peter Kraus gestures after receiving a food delivery from the Rev. April Keech an Anglican priest, in London, Saturday, March 28, 2020. Keech and her team of volunteers have spent the past two weeks buying groceries, filling prescriptions and making deliveries to residents in east London who are at risk of serious illness or death from the COVID-19 disease. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more

severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)



he Rev. April Keech, an Anglican priest, who organizes food deliveries to old and vulnerable people, stands on a street corner in London, Saturday, March 28, 2020. Keech and her team of volunteers have spent the past two weeks buying groceries, filling prescriptions and making deliveries to residents in east London who are at risk of serious illness or death from the COVID-19 disease. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)



The Rev. April Keech, an Anglican priest, who organizes food deliveries to old and vulnerable people, holds a shopping list in London, Saturday, March 28, 2020. Keech and her team of volunteers have spent the past two weeks buying groceries, filling prescriptions and making deliveries to residents in east London who are at

risk of serious illness or death from the COVID-19 disease. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)



The Rev. April Keech, an Anglican priest, who organizes food deliveries to old and vulnerable people, speaks to a woman after a delivery in London, Saturday, March 28, 2020. Keech and her team of volunteers have spent the past two weeks buying groceries, filling prescriptions and making deliveries to residents in east London who are at risk of serious illness or death from the COVID-19 disease. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)



The Rev. April Keech, an Anglican priest, who organizes food deliveries to old and vulnerable people, makes a phone call in London, Saturday, March 28, 2020. Keech and her team of volunteers have spent the past two weeks buying groceries, filling prescriptions and making deliveries to residents in east London who are at risk of serious illness or death from the COVID-19 disease. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it

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LONDON (AP) — The Rev. April Keech knocked on the door of an apartment in east London, took three giant steps back and made way for other volunteers to lay a bag of groceries on the threshold.

The jovial Anglican priest seemed to want to hug the resident, Peter Kraus, when he came to the door, but restrained herself to abide by social distancing requirements for slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

“Hello, Pete! That’s your bag,” Keech told the 68-year-old retired merchant seaman, who lives alone. “I hope you’re OK!”

Keech and her team of volunteers have spent the past two weeks buying groceries, filling prescriptions and making deliveries to residents in east London who are at risk of serious illness or death from the COVID-19 disease. The U.K. has reported more than 25,000 confirmed cases, and 1,789 virus-related deaths among those hospitalized.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

Britain is in the process of mobilizing around 750,000 volunteers to help vulnerable people after the government ordered a nationwide lockdown. So many individuals have offered to help — three times

more than requested — that the government put recruitment on hold until it could process the number who had already come forward.

Since the government initiative is just starting, people like Keech have stepped into the breach to assist those who need help now — not in a week or two.

“Kindness now and compassion for what other people are going through is crucial to help us understand one another, and connect to one another,” said Keech, an associate priest at St. Paul Old Ford Church. “And I think about what is going on here ... and what is to come. We’re not even at the peak of this in London.”

Kraus is grateful. He recently had a stomach operation, so it is risky for him to go outside and move around the city.

“It’s very kind of them to do that,” he said of the weekly deliveries of canned beans, bread and other groceries at his door. “It saves us from going down to the supermarket.”

Keech organized a handful of volunteers after a local doctor asked her to help make sure at-risk patients got their medication days before the lockdown took effect a week ago. Many of those who need assistance are elderly people who have a high risk of respiratory complications, don’t hear well or are a bit baffled by the new invisible enemy. Some sought help just because they were afraid to be alone.

The government is counting on citizens to pitch in and help stretch the resources of local authorities, first responders and the National Health Service like previous generations did during World War II. While attitudes and technology have changed since the 1940s and many people no longer know their neighbors, officials organizing the national effort are encouraged by the outpouring of volunteers.

“We have been absolutely overwhelmed by the response and cannot thank the public enough,” Royal Voluntary Service CEO Catherine Johnstone said. “As history shows, it is often in times of crisis that we pull together and become our best selves.”

Keech has found herself buying lots of beans and white bread for older people, some of whom remember the rationing of the war years. Then there’s the occasional request for something super specific: Can she find boneless, skinless sardines packed with red pepper or olives?

“We are not just here for ourselves, but for others,” she said. “As they heal and receive hope, so do we.”

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