

PROGRAM STILL GOING DESPITE FEDERAL FREEZE

NY Fresh Rx delivers free produce amid funding concerns

BY TIFFANY CUSAAC-SMITH
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On Tuesday morning at East Meadow Farm, a delivery driver loaded several boxes packed with potatoes, cabbage and other fresh produce into the trunk of his gray sedan.

The boxes' destinations were the doorsteps of Nassau County residents who experience food insecurity and have diabetes or other medical conditions that could be treated through a better diet. They are free to the recipients as part of the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County's NY Fresh Rx program, which hopes to improve participants' health outcomes and reach more people this year. Cornell administers the program along with

Harmony Healthcare Long Island and Hofstra University.

However, amid those goals, there is uncertainty around federal funding after the Trump administration sought to pause federal money to determine whether it corresponded with his agenda.

A federal judge ordered Trump to halt the stoppage but said on Monday that the administration had not done so, and that funding for childhood education and other areas was not being doled out.

The NY Fresh Rx program received a grant of about \$480,000 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help fund it over three years. Last year was the first year of funding. Staff there said a funding freeze has not impacted them, but they said the program has other grants from outside the federal government to help sustain and grow the work.

"As a nonprofit, I'm always concerned about funding opportunities," said Nicole



Interns Sydney Goodstein, left, and Hajirah Younas pack NY Fresh Rx boxes for delivery on Tuesday.

Borukhov, nutrition, health, and wellness program coordinator at the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County. "As of right now, this program, we're operating as usual and going about our business."

On Tuesday, the program, which includes partners like Harmony Healthcare Long Island and Hofstra University, and the cooperative extension, made its 1,000th delivery.

Last year, NY Fresh Rx served about 80 people with food sourced from Long Island farms. This year, the program hopes to expand to serve about 150 people in need. Hofstra University is studying if there are any changes in participants' lives from before and after receiving the additional food.

The produce prescription program is open to patients at Harmony Healthcare Long Is-

land — a federally qualified health center that attends to many underserved patients. The staff there work with the patients to identify whether they are facing food insecurity or receive food benefits and have a diet-related medical condition like obesity.

Patients can choose to sign up to be part of the program, which includes the opportunity to take cooking and nutrition classes.

From there, participants can get the food delivered to their homes every other week, which helps eliminate transportation barriers to ensure that people get access to the food. Each box weighs an average of 20 pounds.

"We're offering nutrition education. We'll give . . . you recipes. But if somebody can't get the produce, it doesn't mat-

ter," said Borukhov.

NY Fresh Rx pays DoorDash \$5 per box as part of Project DASH, which helps food banks and other organizations make deliveries.

Daniel Riff, head of government and nonprofit operations at DoorDash, said organizations that partner with Project DASH are able to provide home delivery service to people "who might have barriers to accessing food by coming into a pantry or food bank."

"Those folks may be home-bound. They may not have time in their schedules to make it when the pantry is open. They might be new parents," he said. "And so, the home delivery ensures that they can access food on a consistent basis without having to worry about those challenges."

With AP

Correction officer allegedly stole \$110G in benefits

BY BART JONES
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A Nassau County correction officer allegedly stole more than \$100,000 in health insurance reimbursement benefits following his estranged wife's back surgery, prosecutors said Monday.

Christopher Kowalewski, 49, was arraigned in Nassau County District Court on charges of grand larceny for stealing \$110,096 from the New York State Empire Plan. He pleaded not guilty before Judge Madeleine Petrara-Perin. His attorney said prosecutors had no basis to file the

charges because it is more of a civil dispute.

Kowalewski received 11 checks over a two-year period in connection with his wife's surgery on March 2, 2022, Nassau County District Attorney Anne Donnelly said in a statement. The checks were supposed to be forwarded to out-of-network providers.

Instead, Kowalewski deposited nine of the checks in a joint bank account held in his name and the name of another person whom authorities did not identify, Donnelly said. The two other checks were cashed, she said.

The checks ranged from \$147

to \$92,488, she said. Kowalewski received them between December 2021 and December 2023. They were made out to him and mailed to him because he was the policy holder.

Financial records showed Kowalewski allegedly spent the stolen funds on personal expenses, Donnelly said.

"Public servants are entrusted with doing the right thing, and when they take advantage of the system for personal gain, it hurts everyone," Donnelly said. "This correction officer allegedly stole more than \$100,000 in health insurance payments meant to

pay his estranged wife's medical bills. My office is committed to holding public servants accountable when they violate community trust and ignore their oaths."

But Kowalewski's attorney, Marc Gann, of Mineola, said in a phone interview there was no criminal activity involved and the dispute with the providers and insurance company was being handled in civil court.

"This is a civil dispute that somehow became a criminal matter," he said. "Resolutions were being proposed and then all of a sudden it turned into criminal charges."

The \$92,488 check was deposited in Kowalewski's bank account on Aug. 15, 2022, Donnelly said. Between then and Nov. 14, 2022, he allegedly withdrew \$75,600 in cash from the account.

Kowalewski surrendered to detective investigators from the district attorney's office on Feb. 10, Donnelly said. He is due back in court on March 3. If convicted he faces up to 15 years in prison.

He was released Monday on his own recognizance.

The Office of the Nassau County Inspector General referred the case to the district attorney.