

Local Residents Persevere, Make Adjustments Of Being Unemployed During COVID-19 Pandemic

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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ALTON - When the COVID-19 pandemic started to hit in March, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker issued stay-at-home orders for people in non-essential jobs, and ordered all non-essential businesses to be closed until further notice. It was announced recently that the

order will stay in place until at least May 30, with face coverings and masks becoming mandatory on May 1.

Despite not being able to work because of the pandemic, local residents are persevering and are expressing optimism that things will be back to normal in the near future.

In the case of Foxes Boxes, which sells organically grown food and plants, along with organic baked goods, the company would be getting ready to sell its goods at Post Commons coffee shop in downtown Alton, which includes pies, cross buns, and cinnamon rolls.

"If we hadn't been on lockdown, we would have started our prep for our weekend at Post Commons," said co-owner Tanya Fox. "We would have baked, or got ready to bake, our cinnamon rolls, we would have made sure we went down there and prepped some hot cross buns for the Easter weekend, and maybe some pies, especially for some orders."

Post Commons stayed open for a few days after the closures were announced, experimenting with curb service, but eventually closed, leaving Foxes Boxes without a kitchen to use.

"When this all started, Post Commons tried to stay open for a few days," Cox, a native of London, said, "so we tried really hard to keep up with the idea of doing curbside with them, offering some basic baked goods. But when they closed, we no longer had a commercial kitchen to use, so it made it a little bit difficult. We've been in there a few times, but it's knowing what I'm normally doing. I normally bake three or four times a week in large quantities, and I'm not baking at all," she said with a laugh.

The closures has also affected a businesses that are often overlooked, such as a spay-and-neuter clinic for pets.

"A normal day at the clinic, typically, I get there about eight o'clock," said Stephanie Schrage, the office manager for the Benito D. Rivera Spay And Neuter clinic in Alton. "We take about 25 clients in that first two hours, get everybody registered, get everybody checked in, and then we start the surgery process once everybody's left. We're then in surgery for about four to five hours, pretty much consistently. As far as what I'm doing now, there's no real ability to work from home, we can't do telemedicine with the practice that we have, so I've had to, unfortunately, file for unemployment temporarily, just so I can make it in the meantime. We're a small clinic, so my boss doesn't have the ability to pay me, and keep me on the payroll. So, it's been rough, but, you know, just like everyone else, we're getting through it. I'm spending a lot more time with my dogs, and outside in my yard. That's pretty much how that's been."

For displaced bartenders and restaurant waiters and waitresses, especially those working multiple jobs, it's been a difficult transition, but most are willing to hang tight.

"A normal day for me, I would be heading to work in the afternoon," said spirit artisan Rory Morse, "typically to go bartend at events such as a wedding, a music festival, a barbecue festival, any kind of large gathering. high-volume bartending I was a part of. I kind of had a delicate balance of three different part-time jobs which i kept together pretty well for the past year, up until all of this going on right now. I really miss being able to go back to work and seeing everybody that I work with. I had a really good relationship with a lot of our customers at all three of the jobs I had, and I miss working, I miss seeing the customers, but I do respect what's going on, and understand that taking the best precautions as soon is probably going to get us out of this the quickest. I'm willing to hang on tight, but it would be nice to go back to work."

Making adjustments can be very difficult, especially with those who have a set routine.

"It's pretty difficult not keeping up with our normal routine," Fox said. "We had just gotten into a nice routine with everything we were prepping for our season, and as you can see in the background, there's our stuff getting ready for the season to come," referring to a number of greenhouses used to grow her flowers and plants. "We're hoping that this will be over in time for the market to start for us, because we'll have flowers and vegetables, and we're doing extras, just in case. And if the lockdown continues, we're hoping just to be able to feed some people."

A major project that Fox had planned for her business has been put on hold because of the current restrictions.

"We were in the process of, thanks to Post Commons and everybody buying from us, we were going to build ourselves a commercial kitchen out here," Fox said. "And that has now stopped until we can go back into Post Commons and continue selling. We're using that money we had saved for that commercial kitchen for our tractor payments and things like that."

Despite that setback, Fox is very grateful for her current situation, and for the company's co-owner, Brian Holmes' job, which is helping them tremendously. She also offered help to anyone who needs it, even if it's a small gesture.

"We are super grateful for the situation that we're in," Fox said. "We're very lucky we don't have to worry, thanks to Brian and his job. We feel really bad for everyone else, and if there is anyone else that needs something, I'd gladly bake you bread. I'll bake for anyone," she said with a laugh. "But yeah, if anyone needs anything, we'd be happy to help."

Schrage is also aware how much the current crisis has affected clinics such as the one she works at, and worries about unwanted litters of pets that will occur as time goes on.

"I know this has affected more than just us," Schrage said. "Carol House quick-fix pet clinic in St. Louis also had to close for the same reasons. So the amount of unwanted litters in the next three to six months is going to be terribly unfortunate. The only clinics that are doing it are doing it on an emergency basis, and it's very expensive, so a lot of times, people that I get as clients are bringing in trap neuter and release animals, or strays they found on the street that they really maybe can afford to do it if it's at our low costs. So like other low-cost clinics, us being out of business is definitely going to have an affect over time."

Schrage has made the adjustment of being temporarily unemployed by making sure that other people are being taken care of, and has also ran errands for others in order to help out.

"Personally, it's been an adjustment," Schrage said, "just as far as not having a regular schedule, trying to make sure you have everything you need, and that the people that you love are taken care of and safe. I've had to do some grocery runs for people who couldn't get out, and those kind of things, which does help keep me a little busier. But it was definitely probably a three-week transition period of figuring out how am I supposed to have a normal day, with normal hours. And it's working so far,' Schrage said with a laugh. "I've decided that, you know, you get up at a normal time, and you find a different routine. But it's an adjustment, like it is for everybody."

Seeing what others are going through has motivated Schrage to keep on striving and to be grateful for what she does have in her life.

"To see what other people are struggling with is probably something that's kept me more motivated to not feel so sorry for my situation," Schrage said. "We have a roof over our head, we have food in our mouths. We don't have to go to work, like some of these people in retail. My brother just got a job working for Amazon, and I worry about him every day. My other little brother is a security guard, so he's still gotta work, and he's essential. Why people won't just stay home, going to Home Depot and buying flowers is not really necessary right now; I just think if we could put this on hold for the people that are the most vulnerable. I see homeless people sleeping in parking lots, and the unfortunate situation that so many other people are in, and I have to look at it that I'm blessed, and it could be a lot worse."

In the case of Morse, it's also involving observing social distancing guidelines, particularly among the older members of his family.

"One thing for sure is that a lot of my family falls into a higher age range," Morse said, "many of them being over 70-years-old. And so, I've had to keep my distance and keep our relationships over the phone. Since this has all started, it's been hard, missing birthdays, missing weddings, really hoping we can tie this all together again soon. But I'm also financially in limbo. I've signed up for unemployment; I haven't received any kind of notification or a certification date, I haven't received a stimulus check, and I'm certainly just kind of waiting. So hopefully, I can either go back to work, or some of those follow through soon. I really hope that by the end of this, a lot of the small business around Alton is able to go forward and keep doing what they know and what they love to do. We're a community of small business, and a lot of us rely on being able to shop local, support local and this has been hitting everyone hard and hurting everyone hard, and I'm really waiting for this to just kind of flatten out so we can go back to our normal lives."

Schrage is equally concerned about the hits that the small businesses around the area are taking, and about the future of many of those businesses.

"I think the economic factor is something nobody really wants to talk about, because we have to put life over that," Schrage said, "but we also have to realize is that something I've been watching is that 50 percent of the workforce is small business employed, and that being said, what is going to happen to those small businesses. We will be able to reopen in some form, I would assume, at my clinic, but other places are not going to be able to handle this financial strain, they're not going to be able to hold out for the loans if they even come through. Being on the board for Alton Main Street too, I have a strong concern for our Main Street business owners and their survival. And so, I really hope that, you know, if nothing else, this pushes people to realize how important local business is to the economy."

And in the case of Foxes Boxes, there is an advantage of not having to do other things, but instead focus on their main tasks in planting.

"There are certain things that are an advantage," Holmes said. "We're not necessarily distracted from going out and doing other things, and we can focus on getting the field prepped, and getting the plants in the ground. And we're also taking an opportunity to grow a lot of things we haven't grown before, as far as food crops go, mainly just because we figure we have more land, we could possibly feed people if the situation turns worse, and plenty of things that are staples, such as potatoes, peanuts and green beans, things that people are going to eat every day. We're really looking forward to getting back to normalcy, and the farmer's market, seeing all of our regular customers and putting flowers back on people's kitchen tables, and things like that, and at least see some other smiling faces."



[Charles Thomas also contributed to this story.](#)