

Robots ride to rescue as delivery risks rise

April 16 2020, by Rob Lever



Kimmo Kartano uses his smartphone to open a food delivery robot from the Broad Branch Market grocery store as Audra Grant looks on in front of their house in the Chevy Chase neighborhood of Washington, DC

What looks like a rolling picnic cooler stops at the crosswalk, waits for a car to pass and then navigates its way at a leisurely pace down the sidewalk in suburban Washington.

Three blocks away, Jake Williams and his three-year-old daughter Emilia wait for the [delivery](#) robot and take out bags with pizza, fresh fruit and a loaf of French bread from the nearby Broad Branch Market.

"We can't go into the shops now," says Williams, among those locked down due to the virus pandemic. "And it's fun for her."

The Starship delivery robots have seen surging demand in dozens of cities around the world, with consumers staying home and virus risks growing for both shoppers and delivery workers.

Starship began working with the Broad Branch in early April, when the corner store was forced to close to shoppers because it was too small to ensure proper social distancing.

Store owner Tracy Stannard said a fleet of up to 10 robots each day, managed by Starship, helps the market meet demands in the neighborhood. The store handles 60 to 70 deliveries daily, half by robot.

"Some people request the robot, they don't even care about the groceries," Stannard said. "It's cute to see them roaming the neighborhood and it makes people happy."



A Starship delivery robot leaves the Broad Branch Market grocery store in Washington, DC, on its way to a home customer

Robot deliveries from Starship and a handful of other companies meet only a tiny fraction of food deliveries, but highlight a need in a time of social distancing and pandemic fears.

The jump in demand comes as consumers see a trip to the grocery store as a perilous adventure, and retail employees are scrambling to keep safe.

More than 40 [grocery store](#) employees in the US have died from the

virus, according to a Washington Post tally. And delivery workers around the US have staged protests to press safety demands.

Expanding demand

San Francisco-based Starship Technologies, created by two Skype founders, is gearing up to operate in other areas around Washington and recently launched with retailers in Tempe, Arizona, and in cities in Britain and California.

The rolling devices operate autonomously at a speed of around six kilometers (four miles) per hour and can carry about three bags of goods.



A Postmates delivery robot is seen on its route to deliver food to customers in

Los Angeles on March 24

"The demand for contactless delivery has expanded exponentially in recent weeks," said Ryan Tuohy, vice president of Starship.

"Our robots are doing autonomous deliveries in five countries and we're grateful that our robots can make life a little bit easier for everyone."

A handful of other companies also has been stepping up.

Silicon Valley startup Nuro recently began delivering groceries in the Houston area in partnership with grocery giant Kroger with its R2 autonomous [robot](#), which travels on streets at speeds up to 40 kilometers (25 miles) per hour and can transport some 190 kilos (400 pounds).

Nuro is moving to expand its service and has received approval in California to operate on [public roads](#).

"We did not foresee our service helping to keep Americans safe from contagion. But the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the public need for contactless delivery services," Nuro's David Estrada said in a blog post.



Nuro's R2 self-driving vehicle has been making food deliveries in the Houston area in partnership with Kroger

"Times like these reinforce the need for autonomous delivery services like Nuro, and how they can benefit communities."

Delivery robots from Postmates, a delivery startup, have also been seen on the streets in California. And similar autonomous robots are being tested by Amazon.

Above the fray?

Drone delivery is another area where interest is growing due to the

pandemic.

Wing, the drone startup created by Google parent Alphabet, has seen a jump in demand in its pilot projects in rural southwestern Virginia—where it delivers non-prescription medicines and other items from the Walgreens chain—and in Australia and Finland, a company spokesman said.

"While we recognize that this service will be a small relief during this time, we hope it means one less trip to the store for items our customers may need, and provides an efficient way for local businesses to reach their customers in a time when limiting human-to-human contact is important." Wing CEO James Ryan Burgess said.



A drone operated by California startup Zipline prepares for delivery of medical supplies in Ghana in 2019. The company sees an opportunity to offer similar services in the US as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

Amazon and others have continued testing drone deliveries, but these systems are subject to regulatory barriers which have prevented deployment.

Zipline, a California startup which has been delivering medical supplies by drone in Africa, has indicated it wants offer similar services in the US once it gets regulatory approval.

"Zipline is helping other countries mount their national response efforts to #COVID19," the company said in a tweet. "As an American company in a time of crisis, we want to help our country as well."

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