

THE CHESTER/MENDHAM FOOD PANTRY: Helping Neighbors in Need

By Vicki Andersen

In the past six months, the Chester/Mendham Food Pantry has been helping more neighbors than ever before. Hunger and food insecurity isn't just a problem in other parts of the country or world, it also exists right here in Chester and Mendham.

"Everybody we help is a neighbor," says Executive Director Jacki Spinelli. "They may be senior citizens, families hit with illness or with catastrophic bills, or single parents struggling to feed their families," she continues. There are many reasons for food insecurity, but it does exist here in Chester just as in other parts of the world.

The food pantry began over 18 years ago in Jacki Spinelli's basement. Chester residents Pat Durkin, Buddy Casillo and Ben Spinelli saw that some of their neighbors were in need of food support. Initially, they asked residents to put canned goods and non-perishables out by their mailboxes and the Chester Post Office would pick it up while driving their delivery routes. The items collected were then brought to the Spinellis' basement and sorted and delivered to those in need. Eventually, after several temporary homes, the Chester/Mendham Food Pantry landed in its current space, a Chester Township building shared by the Chester First Aid Squad and other tenants.

The food pantry currently delivers to over 20 families and has 30 to 35 families walk in monthly, numbers that continue to rise. This year, they began working on securing their 501(c)(3) paperwork to incorporate as a nonprofit organization. They renamed themselves the Chester/Mendham Food Pantry as it serves both communities. The nonprofit status will enable them to receive access to things they didn't have before.

"There is a coalition of food pantries authorized by the state that could be utilized to secure more supplies, more donations and funding to continue our work," says Jacki. For example, receiving the nonprofit status will enable the food pantry to receive food collected as a Partner in Caring with ShopRite. Panera Bread has a program to donate unused daily food. As a nonprofit organization, they will be able to benefit from those types of programs.

Summer is the toughest season. There is a greater need when schools are out and children are not receiving school lunches. Summer is also when people are on vacation and donations drop. While the schools are in session, their drives and donations help keep the shelves full. "We try to really stock our shelves in April and May so that we can get through the summer months," Jacki says.

The West Morris Mendham High School Service Club does a food drive between January and March each year. "Without them, we wouldn't survive," says Jacki. The high school has a competition pitting classes against each other to see who can secure the most donations and it literally brings truckloads of supplies and non-

perishables into the food pantry each year. This year they received about 20 carloads or truckloads of supplies!

The Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are strong supporters of the Chester/Mendham Food Pantry and local businesses make donations also and all of their contributions are always appreciated, whether it's donated food or funds.

"Not only is our community amazing in how they respond, but we have a wonderful, dedicated group of volunteers who solicit donations, do pickups from local businesses, deliveries and whatever the food pantry needs to keep it running smoothly," says Jacki. "They have become a family - people who came to help for a variety of reasons but they stay for one mission - to help our neighbors." The volunteers step up when needed, taking on many different tasks and make



the food pantry what it is.

Jacki notes many local churches are huge supporters of the Chester/Mendham Food Pantry. The Community Presbyterian Church partners with the Congregational Church to assure each person helped gets a gift to open for the holidays. They provide additional supplies to make meals during Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Both churches also have collection boxes in their buildings and deliver the donations weekly. St. Lawrence the Martyr holds regular collections for specific items. Grace Bible Chapel holds collections and the Church of the Messiah has a collection box and provides Easter bags for all the people the food pantry helps. Grace Lutheran Church in Mendham held a collection at ShopRite for the food pantry this year.

How do people in need find out about the Chester/Mendham Food Pantry?

"All the schools and local churches know about the services we provide," explains Jacki.

Clients names are kept confidential, so no one needs to fear people will know who they are. New clients are given a number and they fill out a survey as to allergies or special dietary restrictions and what items they might need. The food pantry cannot be the client's main food supply. They are only supplemental.

If you or a neighbor in Chester or Mendham is in need of supplemental food support, please call the Chester/Mendham Food Pantry at 908-879-2548 or 973-876-3181 and leave a message as to what the specific need is.

Additionally, if you are able to donate a box or can of food each week when grocery shopping, it would definitely be appreciated.

"We are so thankful for the wonderful community support we receive, it truly never fails us," says Jacki.