

Northside food pantries adapt to meet growing needs, safety concerns

By Nicole Sandler
Northside News

Food pantries are important to many communities, but now, in the face of a pandemic, they are essential. As the battle with COVID-19 continues, the economic fallout and rising rate of unemployment impact a growing number of individuals and families. Paying for groceries is a challenge for many. Yet, no one should go hungry in our community.

Everyone Northsider should be aware of the many food resources available. If not for you and your family, this information can be shared with those you know who need support during this unprecedented time.

Here on the Northside, operational food pantries include The River, Lakeview Lutheran Church and Kennedy Heights Community Center. Each pantry varies in its hours and offerings, but they are doing phenomenal work to get fresh food at no cost to those who need it.

In the face of COVID-19, these pantries recognized the need to do more and to adapt to the restrictions imposed by the health crisis. The River Food Pantry, for example, changed its distribution model and added an entirely new program.

“We had to pivot immediately,” said Rhonda Adams, interim executive director of The River Food Pantry. In place of the in-person market shopping program that invited clients to peruse and choose food, The River now distributes food through curbside pickup. Prepackaged boxes and bags of perishable and non-perishable food include fresh produce, milk, cheese, eggs and frozen meats (approximately 110 pounds of food per visit) and are placed into clients’ vehicles when they drive up each week. Food distribution hours are Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–3 pm.

“We’re happy to be able to provide some extras now, in addition to food, like hygiene products, toilet paper and diapers,” said Adams, “and we try to switch it up each week.”

The River’s popular MUNCH mobile lunch program (look for the brightly painted MUNCH van traveling throughout the Northside) has continued to operate since the pandemic began. In recognition of the need for this service, especially when schools closed this spring, the program operates six

days a week and makes nine different stops. According to Adams, MUNCH distributes on average 220 pre-bagged lunches each day. Thanks to the many volunteers who assist with this program, it has not missed a beat as demand has grown.

The newest program at The River is Family At-home Meals (FAM), which kicked off in mid-June. By mid-August, nearly 10,000 fresh meals had been distributed. Each day the meals are planned, prepared and assembled by The River’s community meals coordinator, Chef Chris Tuttle, with help from a newly hired assistant, Rachael Maynes (formerly of Manna Café), and many dedicated volunteers. FAM meals are available for curbside pickup Tuesday–Friday, along with weekly market boxes, from 10 am–2 pm.

There’s no doubt that food pantries like The River are helping to solve the problem of food insecurity made worse by COVID-19. Adams shares this telling statistic: of the 3,500 households served by The River in the first five months of the pandemic, one-third of those households had never before visited the pantry.

“We think we’ll continue to see this number rise, and most important to why we do what we do is our belief that food is a right, not a privilege,” she said. “We don’t want anyone to feel afraid or ashamed to come to the

Food Pantries continues on page 11

Food Pantries continued from page 10

pantry. There is food available, but people need to feel comfortable coming here and asking for it.”

Like The River, the Lakeview Lutheran Church Food Pantry instituted changes as quickly as possible to meet the increased demand for food in response to the pandemic. The pantry formerly operated once a month, but it is now open weekly — every Monday, 4:30–6:30 pm — for no-contact, curbside pick up. The number of families served by the Lakeview Food Pantry has increased by nearly 30%.

“The volume really increased and initially we were scrambling to be able to help more families,” said Gretchen Macht, the pantry’s coordinator. “But now that we’ve adjusted, everything is going smoothly.” She attributes this to the 10 core volunteers who assist her in running the Lakeview Food Pantry and praises their dedicated efforts to keep the program safe and sanitary. In addition to their work distributing food on Mondays, the group meets every Sunday to assemble the bags of food, much of it fresh produce gleaned at Sunday’s Northside Farmers Market.

The success of their pantry relies on the plentiful food it receives, much of it from Community Action Coalition (CAC) of South Central Wisconsin. CAC delivers approximately 100 cases of food each month. Lakeview Lutheran Church, where the pantry operates, continues to be very generous in its support of the program. It recently donated a new refrigerator and freezer to help store the increased amount of food

needed to feed our community.

“I see how stressed people are when they come each week to pick up food, and I know that food insecurity is only one of the many stressors they are facing right now,” said Macht. “But I realize that if I can eliminate just one of those stressors each week, things might go better for these families.”

Macht served as a volunteer for the Lakeview Food Pantry for four years before taking on the role of coordinator five years ago, still in a volunteer capacity. As a longtime Northsider, she is acutely aware of the community’s needs during this difficult time, and is appreciative of the critical donations that help sustain the program. For example, the Northside Business Association provides an annual donation and hosts events such as Breakfast with Santa to raise dollars to support the pantry.

Both The River and Lakeview food pantries, given their reach and community support, serve anyone in Dane County.

Another Northside food pantry operates out of the Kennedy Heights Community Center and focuses primarily on Kennedy Heights residents. The pantry is open Mondays from 5–6 pm for Kennedy Heights residents and from 6–6:30 pm for others in the 53704 ZIP code.

Northside food pantry locations and phone numbers are: The River, 2201 Darwin Road, 608-442-8815; Lakeview Lutheran Church, 4001 Mandrake Road, 608-244-6181; and Kennedy Heights Community Center, 199 Kennedy Heights, 608-244-0767.

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