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www.oprffoodpantry.org

HOURS OF DISTRIBUTION

- Every Saturday:
9:00 am – 12:00 pm
- 1st Wednesday of the month:
7:00 pm – 8:30 pm
- All Other Wednesdays:
3:30 pm – 5:00 pm

PANTRY *Pulse*

News from Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry

FALL 2018

MORE THAN FOOD

One of the most impactful – if least visible – programs offered at Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry is Social Services Connection. Tucked away in a cube down the hall from the Pantry, Amanda Kuhn, Social Services Coordinator, meets one-on-one with people seeking help applying for public benefits, such as SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, Medicare Savings, and Benefit Access. She also helps people obtain certain identification documents.

“The process can be so frustrating,” says Amanda. “They have to go to many different offices and stand in long lines. We can help with that.”

Since she started in Spring 2018, each month Amanda has helped about 65 families connect to over 100 services. A surprising number of people – about 30

per month – need help covering the cost of IDs, whose \$20 cost can be prohibitive. Put in perspective, the average SNAP benefits per day are less than \$4 – so a \$20 cost can be equal to what people spend on 5 days of food.

An ID can be crucial, giving people access to services (including the Food Pantry) and proof of their identity. Here, if they need help getting an ID Amanda will not only help them get the necessary paperwork, but she can also provide a money order to cover the cost.

“The work is fulfilling,” Amanda says. “I really love distribution days, because I enjoy all of the client interactions. There is a contagious energy you can see in all of the volunteers, and I love the spirit of the Pantry. This is a special place.”



Amanda helps follow up on application status, in addition to submitting the application.

AVERAGE PER MONTH



66 families received help applying for social services



74% of families were approved for SNAP benefits



\$119 was the average SNAP benefit for families approved



31 people were funded for identification documents

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF VOLUNTEERS

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois (BCBSIL), and four partner Blue Cross Blue Shield plans, have set an ambitious goal: reach 1 million volunteer hours by 2021. Lucky for us, they're doubling down on efforts to encourage employees to use their Volunteer Matching Dollars program.

"Showing up for our communities and making a positive impact in the lives of our members is part of our commitment to Illinois - as an employer, business leader and as your friends and neighbors," said Shelley Long, manager, Community Relations, BCBSIL. "Our employees tirelessly giving of their time to support Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry allows us to address hunger and food insecurity, which is one of the key focus areas of our Healthy Kids, Healthy Families® initiative."

When BCBSIL employees volunteer at the Pantry, they can log their hours to be matched with company funds and the impact is significant! Last month we received a check from BCBSIL totaling \$1,160. The month before that we received one for \$920. To put that in context, the average donation we received last year was \$250.

"Volunteer matching programs like Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois give us an amazing opportunity to leverage our resources," says Teri Miller, Director of Development at Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry. "We're not always aware which volunteer made that gift happen, but the impact is tremendous."

Programs like this allow us to maximize our most valuable resource - our volunteers - and provide a serious advantage in our efforts to end hunger. That check we received - the one for \$1,160 - is enough to provide 3,500 meals to the families we serve. And in a beautiful circle of generosity, the volunteers who generated that check sorted, stacked, and distributed the food that their hours helped purchase.

"I am inspired by the spirit, energy and commitment of all our volunteers," says Teri. "It's amazing that volunteers have this power to give in so many ways - time, talent, and money - to organizations they care about."

DOING THE "RIGHT THING"

One of Vickie Engelhardt's enduring memories as a Pantry volunteer is the first time she worked to register new clients.

"It was 9 am, the door opened and people began pouring in," Vickie recalled recently. "I thought, 'In our community, where there is so much need, this is what we should be doing.'"

Vickie has experienced that "right thing" feeling many times during her eight years and thousands of hours as a Pantry volunteer.

A Northwestern graduate and an Oak Park resident since 1966, Vickie spent decades juggling family and a career as an insurance claims manager, as well as establishing one of the area's first pet-sitting businesses.

Her ongoing interest in community service, however, led her through involvement with her church—First United—to the Pantry in 2010. As with many new volunteers, Vickie tried out an assortment of jobs at the Pantry, from bagging and sorting to food rescue, before ultimately landing in client services, where her attention to detail, computer skills and genial manner had immediate impact. There she has helped clients navigate the sometimes complicated landscape of benefits, helping them secure the services for which they're qualified. It's gratifying work.

"I helped a couple with their Link card application, and when we finished and I told them what they might be entitled to,



Vickie provides a personal touch by calling Food Pantry visitors to see if they'd like help applying for benefits.

they started crying," Vickie said. "They were so grateful."

Vickie's colleagues at the Pantry have noticed her dedication. "Vickie is amazing!" exclaims Pantry Executive Director, Michele Zurakowski. "You know how in a time of need some people say, 'Just let me know how I can help' and then disappear? Well, during our recent staff transition, Vickie stepped up completely, working at nearly every food distribution for two months to make sure our clients got the help they needed. She is the personification of the friend in need - there when you truly need it!"

Vickie says work at the Pantry feeds her need to be involved, part of something important to the larger community.

"I like to work," she says. "I like to do something where you can see you're making a difference."

THE PANTRY IS THANKFUL TO THE FOLLOWING FUNDERS FOR GRANT SUPPORT IN FY2018

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This list includes FIRST TIME DONORS January 1, 2018 to June 30, 2018. If we attributed your name incorrectly, please accept our sincerest apologies and let us know by contacting LaurenB@oprffoodpantry.org

MEET GEORGE

No Matter the challenge, George and his family face it head-on. George, his wife Adelina, and his stepson Nicholas take obstacles in stride, not afraid to work hard and seek out resources when needed. Since being referred by Oak Park Township, Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry has been one of these resources.

“This Pantry gives us such decent portions. I’m the chef in the family and I’m careful to take only what we’ll use, because we get a lot,” says George. In addition to receiving groceries, on-staff Social Services Coordinator, Amanda Kuhn, has helped the family explore their options for public benefits.

George, 49 is legally blind, as is his wife Adelina, 53, who also has epilepsy and diabetes. Despite their obstacles, their undaunted attitude is inspiring.

“The only limitations we have are the ones we put on ourselves,” says George. It took him a year to find seasonal work after moving to Chicago from Texas a year ago. Shortly after the move, his stepson, Nicholas, joined the pair from Florida. George now works at the Brookfield Zoo’s Tropical Grill, and he’s thrilled to be there. “I have a great rapport with the animals, and I get to volunteer with the red panda, too! Plus with the zoo’s musical entertainment, I’m jamming out while I’m working, cause they crank it up!” he laughs.

Adelina is about to start studying at Triton College and hopes to find a way to work with the blind and hearing impaired. She and George also plan to try the Pantry’s next session of Cooking Matters to learn more about diabetic-friendly and heart-healthy cooking. “We’re pro-active,” says George, “living together and addressing each other’s needs.” A remedy for success, indeed.



PANTRY Pulse

Tickets on Sale NOW!



Lucinda Williams

Friday, November 16

~~Saturday, October 17~~

Join us for a 2-night concert series with Lucinda Williams benefiting Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry!

For tickets visit

www.oprffoodpantry.org/LucindaWilliams



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