

St. Johns food pantry sees record need for aid

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St. Johns Ecumenical Ministries Food Pantry is the only food pantry in St. Johns County that serves those who remain food insecure every single day.

Populations include seniors on fixed incomes, families receiving SNAP or other assistance, the homeless, unemployment situations and workforce affordability.

Currently facing record demand from rising inflation costs, declining federal food subsidies, plus an increase in local families relying on community donations, the food pantry is expecting to serve more than 30,000 families this year.

Board President Greg Towner told the St. Augustine Record that he attributes those numbers to “lingering economic issues since the COVID-19 pandemic and the county’s rapid population growth.”

“We served 28,000 families last year, and right now we’re progressing to a point where we’re going to be at 30,000 this year,” Towner said.

Founded in 1992 by a coalition of churches, the pantry was created as an ecumenical ministry designed to assist residents struggling with “putting food on the table.”

Today, volunteers from local congregations distribute prepared food packages to families arriving by car. Recipients receive bread, desserts, produce and staple foods such as pasta, noodles, mac ’n cheese, rice, beans, soup, canned vegetables and pasta sauce. Meat is included when supplies are available.

The pantry also serves people without transportation or current permanent housing and provides sandwiches, snacks and hygiene products to those who arrive on foot or on bicycle.

While demand has increased, Towner said that federal food shipments from traditional supply channels and food sources such as the USDA and Feeding Northeast Florida, have dwindled over the last year and a half.

“Yesterday, we served 173 cars in two hours,” Towner said. “When supplies run low, the pantry has no choice but to reduce distributions.”

To compensate, the pantry relies on partnerships with local food organizations such as Epic-Cure and donations from Publix for dairy products and produce items.

Towner noted that those receiving assistance are not just the homeless or unemployed, but residents from St. Augustine’s 32084 and 32086 zip codes; residents who may appear to be financially stable but still need assistance.

“We see the same people over and over,” he said. “I think people would be surprised at the amount of working families whose incomes have not kept pace with rising housing and grocery costs. Our county is not cheap to live in.”

Towner said the pantry’s challenge is a lack of resources to meet growing demand. To keep shelves stocked, the pantry relies heavily on donations. Last year, it received approximately \$220,000 in gifts and contributions, with \$15,000 coming from grants. Towner said financial donations are especially important because they allow the organization to purchase staples when donated food is unavailable.

“The money donations help us the most,” he said.

Towner is encouraging churches, schools, homeowner associations, businesses and civic groups to organize food drives to collect canned goods and shelf items.

Organizations that have recently supported the pantry include Memorial Hospital through a canned-food sculpture competition, The St. Augustine Amphitheatre through food-drive events such as Rock the Pantries, religious congregations across the county plus local businesses and community groups.

Despite the challenges, Towner said volunteers and clients remain grateful. Families routinely thank pantry workers for their assistance while volunteers continue showing up day after day to help neighbors in need.

Located at 12 Madeore St. in St. Augustine, the pantry operates daily from 1 to 3 p.m. from an old school building leased from the St. Johns County school district. The pantry houses eight refrigerator/freezer units and two climate-controlled storage trailers.

About the St. Johns Ecumenical Ministries Food Pantry

St. Johns Ecumenical Ministries Food Pantry promotes public awareness of local hunger issues and offers emergency food assistance to residents of St. Johns County. Staffed by volunteers from 12 member churches, the pantry is largely supported by donations from community organizations and residents.

The Brotherhood of St. Andrew of Trinity Episcopal Parish and other organizations provides labor for transporting, unloading, and shelving food and for up-keep of our physical plant.

St. Johns Ecumenical Food Pantry purchases discounted food from Feeding Northeast Florida of Jacksonville and receives other food from the United States Department of Agriculture through FarmShare.