

Ham  
Salmon  
Sardines  
Spam  
Tuna

Canned Soup  
Canned Beans  
Dry Bean Mix  
Assorted Packaged Snacks



Amanda Grant,  
Bethanny Alexander  
and Sonja Martinez

# Harvesting HOPE

*Westchester Food Pantry plans fundraiser at Plymouth Place in September*

By Mike Ellis || Photography by Cheryl Brown

**A** local non-profit organization with growing need will be hosting a fundraiser at Plymouth Place in La Grange Park this fall to raise awareness and contribute to its future sustainability.

The Westchester Food Pantry, a member of the Greater Chicago Food Depository (GCFD), serves eight communities in western Cook County: La Grange Park, Western Springs, Westchester, Berkeley, Bellwood, Broadview, Hillside and Hines.

The pantry is open once per month to anyone from each of those communities in need of food. While the highest proportion of pantry clients hail from Bellwood, the number of individuals and families served across all eight municipalities has increased since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic.

"It's a lot more pervasive in Westchester and other communities than I think people understand," executive director Amanda Grant said.

The Westchester Food Pantry started out of a Westchester woman's private garage more than 25 years ago, with food being given to needy individuals around Thanksgiving.

"She found herself unexpectedly single," Grant said. ... "Her friends and family really banded around her during that time, and she realized that if it had not been for them, she would have been in a horrible situation. She got through it, and she really wanted to pay it forward."

Over time, the pantry moved to an unheated garage within the village public works building, and then to a closet inside the village hall at Mannheim and Roosevelt Roads. Those seeking food would have to approach village staff to inquire for food.

"For many years, we worked out of the village hall community room on a Friday night," Grant said.

A Westchester resident, Grant has been volunteering with the pantry for about nine years. She noticed a small ad in her village paper stating that there was a food pantry in Westchester, and went there to see how she could assist.

"There were a lot of things that they were doing that I thought we could be doing more of or better to get food," Grant said.

Grant compiled a six-page list of ideas for fundraising and communications for the organization, which prompted its founder to deliver a box of materials to her house and pass the torch.

"She said she had been doing the pantry for so long, she was ready to move on," she said.

At first, Grant and a friend served as co-directors, defining a service area, establishing the pantry as a 501(c)(3), and joining the GCFD. After her friend departed to return to work, Grant became the executive director

of the all-volunteer organization.

The pandemic marked a critical juncture for the pantry on multiple levels.

"That really changed how we could do things," Grant said. "Instead of people coming inside, we actually worked 14 months out in the cold and the heat and the



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*Amanda Grant*

rain and the snow, delivering groceries to people's cars. ... We had a lot of people who were in great need during COVID, that had never needed us before, and once they got back on their feet, haven't needed us since. That really opened a lot of people's eyes that this could happen to anyone."

While need increased and the pantry was required to alter its model, Westchester also decided it was going to relocate its village hall to Enterprise Drive, and that there would be no space for the pantry.

"They were very clear with us that they would not be taking us with them," Grant said. "There would be no room for us there, so we had to start really kicking fundraising into high-gear, and looking for a space of our own."

The pantry purchased its current building on Mannheim just north of Cermak Road shortly before Thanksgiving in 2020.

"We had to go through about six months of renovations to make this space workable for what we needed it to be," Grant said,

adding that it opened in June 2021.

The Westchester pantry is open on Wednesdays from 4:30 to 7 p.m., and on Saturdays from 9 to 11 a.m.

"You could drive past here at 3:30 on a Wednesday or 8 on Saturday morning, and you will see a line across the entire front [of the] building, and wrapping around to the gas station next door," Grant said.

During each visit, clients receive two bags of pantry staples, a bag of frozen meat, a bag of bread items, eggs and a bag of produce. They can also select from various products in a "client choice" section.

"Each cart that leaves our facility is worth around \$350 retail," Grant said.

The pantry requests proof of residency, except for homeless individuals, who are admitted freely.

"We do not have any kind of income requirement," Grant said. "If you're willing to come here and stand in line for an hour, hour and a half before our doors even open, we're just going to trust that you need food. ... I think for so many of our clients who come in, it takes a lot of courage to walk in these doors."

The pantry serves about 500 households per month, setting a record of 501 this past March.

"Over the years, we've taken something that was maybe ten people a month coming to the front desk of the village hall to nearly 500 people every month who come to get food here," Grant said.

Fundraising chair and board secretary Bethanny Alexander said a lot of clients come only once or twice, suffering from a "temporary setback."

Board member Sonja Martinez, who recently moved to Western Springs from Westchester, said she has seen clients past and present also function as volunteers.

"There is a lot of appreciation and understanding that this is a community place," Martinez said.

The pantry receives about 40 percent of its food from the GCFD, as well as pre-backed deli meals from partner grocery stores. It also stocks toiletries, household goods and snacks for children.

"We try to account for everyone who's

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in the household so we know exactly what hunger looks like in our area,” Grant said.

The organization is one of the few “wet-nose” pantries in Cook County.

“When people fall on hard times, pets are [oftentimes] the first to go, because they can’t afford to keep them anymore,” Alexander said.

The pantry’s greatest concern for the future is its sustainability. It is 100-percent volunteer run and strictly independent, not affiliated with a church or other entity like some others. Its leadership team consists of five people, each of whom Alexander said “easily put in at least 40 hours a week.”

“Truthfully, what we have here volunteer-wise is not sustainable,” Grant said. “We have our leadership team of five, and four of them are retired, and they’re here 40 hours a week for free. ... We have people who are doing a great job, but they’re not going to be here forever—and I don’t see hunger leaving us anytime soon.”

Accordingly, the pantry is embarking on new fundraising initiatives in attempt to become more sustainable.

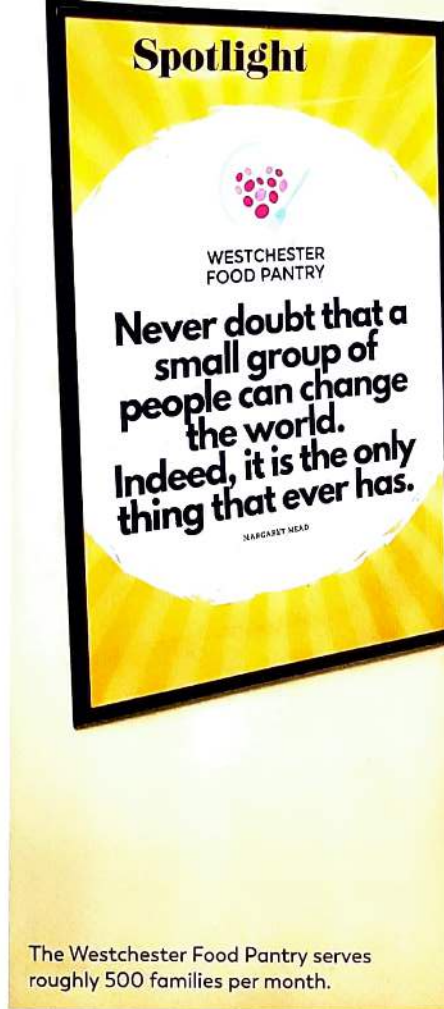
It will host a “harvesting hope” fundraiser at Plymouth Place on Sept. 26 from 6 to 8 p.m., open to 100 attendees, with tickets sold at \$50 per person. Harvesting hope is designed to thank existing pantry donors, and to identify new ones who might be willing to partner.

“The goal is really to get the word out around our mission, around who we serve, the impact and the community,” said Margaret Closius, a fundraising committee member and Harding Woods resident.

Plymouth Place is donating the space for the evening, and will provide food and beverages. The Westchester Food Pantry is planning to have a guest speaker, musical entertainment and a paddle-raise. It also partnered with a filmmaker to produce a video concerning the pantry.

“Some of the people who will be coming have maybe never been here, or really don’t know what we do,” Alexander said.

Alexander described the event as “foundational.”



The Westchester Food Pantry serves roughly 500 families per month.



“We understand that our ultimate goal of having enough on an annual basis to have paid staff will not be achieved this year,” Closius said, adding that they need to begin heading in that direction.

As the demand for service continues to grow, Grant said the pantry is its region’s

“safety-net,” and the organization’s volunteer spirit “creates such an amazing atmosphere,” which clients feel on walking through the doors.

“This is really a place that serves from love,” she said, “and an incredibly strong sense of community.” ■