

MLKC Center Plans for a Second Food Pantry



The new CEO of the Rhode Island Food Bank, Melissa Cherney, learned about the Food to Friends program from Heather Hole Strout, MLKC Center director on a recent visit to the Center. (Photo by Lynne Tungett)

By Ellen Lahr

As food insecurity persists and grows for many Newporters, and the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center is seeing the need up close, with more food pantry shoppers, more lunch guests and more breakfast drop-ins.

Now the MLKC Center is exploring where and how to add a second permanent food pantry location at the North End of town, said Heather Hole Strout, MLKC Center's executive director.

"We know the need is great there, and we are committed to making this happen in the north end," Strout said.

In a survey of 125 pantry clients last spring, 25 percent said access to transportation limited their ability to access the food pantry downtown, Strout said. More than 50 percent of those people reside in the North End.

MLKC clients surveyed also asked for more fresh produce, and area farmers have stepped up to help meet the need. MLKC Center has built a network of five partner farms that sell their produce at a discount to the center. Participating are Garman Farm, Hawk and Handsaw Farm, Roots Farm, The Local Patch and Little River Farm. Their fall harvest is displayed in the pantry in the usual fall array of color: apples, eggplant, peppers, sweet potatoes and more.

"Farmer's markets can be cost prohibitive, but our farmers think everyone should be able to access food grown in the community," said Ed Crowley, MLKC Center's director of hunger services.

The North End plan depends on finding a land parcel that can accommodate a small modular building to house a pantry. Strout said city-owned land may be an option, and those efforts are underway.

"As soon as we get the go-ahead, we will get things up and running," said Strout.

In addition to its food pantry and free meal programs for seniors, on-site pre-school students, meal deliveries for homebound people, and monthly community suppers, MLKC Center distributes food at area schools and mobile farm stands throughout the area.

Crowley said while people historically have used food pantries and similar programs as emergency stopgaps during a hard time, that's changing.

"People are more persistently in need of help," he said, noting that he's seeing more working people routinely tapping into the food pantry, as well as more new faces. "It's more than just an emergency."

As the center's 2025 fiscal year wrapped up on June 30, the year-over-year numbers told the story of rising need: an overall 8 percent increase in client numbers at the

center compared with 2024.

"It was a drastic increase," said Crowley.

Measured against Newport's 2024 population of 24,482, the MLKC's data points to food insecurity for about 10 percent of the city's residents. And hunger issues have an outsized impact on children, said Strout.

Where does MLKC Center get its food? In addition to the farm network providing produce 46 percent of its food supply comes from the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. Other sources include area grocers, farmer's markets and individuals who contribute non-perishable items. An extensive renovation during the last several years created additional space to accommodate its growing food programs and food pantry needs in particular.

Meanwhile, the community center's mobile food program is bringing more food to neighborhoods in the region. Before the mobile distribution program got up and running, 90 percent of MLKC Center food programs clientele were from Newport. Now, with a wider mobile food radius, the Newport number is at 65 percent.

Strout said food is the first line of defense in helping people fight poverty and housing insecurity. If people can be assured of food, their funds can be freed up for utilities and other bills. And if people can eat more healthy food, communities can achieve better health, she said.

The new CEO of the Rhode Island Food Bank, Melissa Cherney, visited the MLKC Center on Sept. 25 as part of a tour of food security programs around the state. During her visit in Newport, she noted that the fastest growing food pantry operations are in schools around the state.



Ed Crowley, director of hunger services at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center, has helped build a network of five area farmers who sell fresh produce to the center at a discounted price. (Photo by Ellen Lahr)

"The Food Bank and all the member agencies we help support are stepping up and serving more people year after year at a time when resources are limited, stretched thin, and being threatened," Cherney said in a statement. "Now is a critical time for us as advocates, service providers, and supporters to come together to ensure we are meeting people's immediate needs while looking for innovative ways to prevent hunger in the first place."

With rising need, is the MLKC Center able to keep up with area residents' needs?

Strout replied, "We are meeting the need, but it is a day-to-day effort." She said the food program depends heavily on about \$900,000 worth of in-kind donations.

The MLKC Center's annual appeal will be launched in late October. "End of year giving is a time we see generosity unlike other times of the year," she said.

For the Thanksgiving holiday, the Food Bank will supply 700 turkeys to MLKC clients.



The numbers tell the story:

◆ Compared with 2024, the MLKC Center center measures an 8 percent increase in the number of people accessing food programs and a 20 percent increase in the number of meals distributed.

◆ MLKC Center counts an average of 1,350 unique households per month receiving some form of food support from the center's various food programs, including the pantry, onsite meals and off-site distributions. The monthly household numbers represent about 2,400 individuals.

◆ In 2024, the food pantry alone averaged 842 households per month (comprising 1,541 individuals), while in the 2025 fiscal year the pantry averaged 965 monthly shoppers, serving 1,785 individuals.

◆ Across all food programs, the center distributed 852,169 lbs of food, or 426 tons.

◆ Of the total pounds distributed were 282,000 pounds of produce – up from 230,000 in 2024. Most of that fresh produce comes the five farm partners.



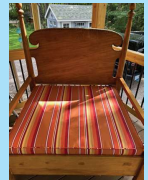
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