

Bar Harbor Times

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Sea Coast Mission fighting hunger in Eastern Maine

By Jason Wimbiscus | Nov 30, 2010



(Courtesy of: Maine Sea Coast Mission)

Gena Norgaard, manager of the Cherryfield Food Pantry, prepares a box full of goods.

CHERRYFIELD — It is estimated that 13.3 percent households struggle with hunger and 19.5 percent of those under the age of 18 experience food insecurity. Additionally, Maine ranks ninth in the nation in terms of the number of people experiencing food insecurity and has the highest food insecurity rate among the New England states. In the face of these statistics are organizations that keep Maine families fed, and warm, in a time when needs and resources are dwindling. One such organization serving western Washington counties is the Maine Sea Coast Mission, 127 West St. in Bar Harbor.

Wendy Harrington, who directs the Mission's food pantry, started with the organization in its EdGE after school program and changed her focus after coming to a realization that work with children had a limited effect. Three years ago, she made a transition to working with the food pantry.

"You realize with youth development work that what you do with children doesn't continue on unless you bring in the adult role. The adult role has always been building community around what you did for youth," said Harrington.

The Cherryfield Food Pantry provides a variety of food items in western Washington County and in 2009 provided 1,000 meals to 3,980 people. These numbers represented a 25 percent increase in need over 2008 figures.

The Cherryfield pantry is run in a manner that sets it apart from similar establishments. As Sea Coast Mission Director

pointed out, customers at its food pantry are treated like customers at any other small town grocery store or food market.

"People are treated with a lot of dignity and respect and aren't hustled in and out. That is very unusual," said Harrington. "It's the tradition of this whole organization; this particular care and things being done with tremendous respect for people's dignity. It's very unusual."

Additionally, the pantry works closely with the mission's EdGE program to provide after school meals for children in need. According to Harrington, children are statistically the most food insecure during after school hours who do not have access to assistance programs such as school based meals. To combat this, the food pantry coordinates with local businesses to have donated backpacks stocked with meals are discreetly provided for kids in need.

The pantry has also become creative with the ways in which it secures food for local communities, as both the need for food and fuel assistance has risen in recent years. In the last 12 months, Harrington said, the cost of the program has doubled. This problem has been exacerbated by a recent decline in donations.

"People just aren't donating food and fuel right now. We've found we're down in our donations and other food items are going down as well," said Harrington. "It's impacting how much people get and how nutritious the food is."

To both alleviate supply issues and increase the nutritional value of the food clients receive, the pantry maintains a garden during the growing season and works with local farmers to provide fresh produce. The pantry also works with cooperative extension services to offer classes on how to prepare healthy meals from whole ingredients. Through the process of working with the Washington County Food and Fuel Alliance to construct a passively solar-heated greenhouse that would enable the pantry to provide fresh produce — even during the winter months.

Such steps take the pantry beyond being a resource that simply meets the caloric requirements of those in need; it also seeks to promote community wellness.

“We can get cheap food and fill their bellies, but we really want to be able to help them eat well and be healthy in Harrington.

For more information about the Maine Sea Coast Mission and its work, call 288-5097 or visit seacoastmission.org



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