

New York Common Pantry

An Uncommon Solution to Hunger

New York Common Pantry (NYCP) is very much “the little emergency food program that could”. The most surprising thing about the organization, formerly known as Yorkville Common Pantry, may not be that they provided 2.5 million meals to almost 300,000 recipients last year. Or, that their kitchen serves five sit down breakfasts and three hot dinners as well as four takeaway “brown bag” meals every week – 75,147 meals annually – for up to 400 men, women and children per seating. Or that they attract residents from a full 157 of New York City’s 200 zip codes. It’s not even that the agency’s Help 365 Single Stop program and partners assisted individuals and families to access over \$3.7 million in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other entitlement benefits. Or, that their healthy nutrition programs and technical assistance are now reaching out to help other programs in Far Rockaway and the Bronx.

Most surprising is that New York Common Pantry is able to do all this... and much more... out of what, relatively speaking, seems like a tiny, 10,000 sq. ft., two-story, yellow-brick building at 8 East 109th Street right off the corner of Fifth Avenue. Dwarfed by a modern, 20-plus-story, gleaming silver apartment building across the street and even the more traditional six-story brick apartment house next to it, New York Common Pantry’s physical home appears incongruous, both with its neighbors and its own outsized but well-deserved reputation.

Walking inside, the tightly-packed crowds of people seeking help and the cadres of volunteers providing it give an initial impression of chaos, until you realize that everyone is moving through a carefully-choreographed, high-tech process of submitting grocery orders from the Choice Pantry’s selection of nutritious food items. The work flow has been carefully tweaked – using advice from its cadre of volunteers and engineers at Toyota – to make the most advantageous use of the agency’s limited space resources. New York Common Pantry packs an awful lot of programming into every inch of its facility.

A Common Effort

New York Common Pantry was founded in 1979. “There was a growing need and demand for food on the part of senior citizens, the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, and individuals who were marginally housed or homeless,” says Stephen Grimaldi, who has led the organization since 2008. “It was a really terrible sign when you could see people eating out of garbage cans on the Upper East Side.”

Representatives mostly from faith communities in the Yorkville neighborhood came together seeking a “common approach” to addressing the problem. “That is where the ‘Common’ in our name comes from,” says Grimaldi. “Churches and synagogues pooled their efforts to respond to the need.” To this day, New York Common Pantry lists 18

Sponsoring Organizations, many of which were among the group’s founders and some of whom are represented on the agency’s board of directors.

“We were initially housed in the basement of The Church of the Holy Trinity on East 88th Street,” says Grimaldi. “In that first year, we were serving about 30 families, getting donated food from bakeries and other local sources. It was 100% volunteer run.”

Soon after, in 1982, the group launched its first hot meal program at a school on East 91st Street.

And, then, about five years later, the Pantry moved into the current space on 109th Street which has been its home ever since. Hard as it is to imagine, the building was even smaller then than it is now. In 1992, with help from Robin Hood Foundation, they raised \$700,000 for renovations. Then, in 2007, Robin Hood again provided funding to add another floor to the building. “It allowed people to wait inside out of the elements and enabled us to serve more people,” says Grimaldi.

For the first ten years of its existence, New York Common Pantry only opened its shelves to the public one day per week. “We spent the whole week preparing for a Thursday Pantry,” says Grimaldi. Then, Friday was added to meet the special needs of seniors and individuals with disabilities who required more time. A Saturday pantry was opened as the organizations realized that there were many working individuals and families who needed help but could not make it during weekdays. And, finally, a Wednesday pantry day was added simply to accommodate the rising demand.

Last year alone, NYCP saw a 24% increase in the number of people served in its pantry programs.

“Now we are thinking about the need to add another day... probably Sundays... for working individuals and families,” says Grimaldi. “It’s a real commitment. It means raising another \$200,000, getting the food and recruiting and training thousands more volunteers.”

Offering a Choice

In 2011, NYCP transitioned its pantry to a “Choice” model. Rather than simply giving out pre-packed bags of groceries, a Choice Pantry allows individuals to make their own selection from different items available within the various food groups. “It goes back to our commitment to serve people with dignity,” says Grimaldi. “They are able to make their own choices just like they would if they were out shopping.”

The Choice Model also ensures that clients are more likely to fully utilize the food they select. “About four years ago, a senior citizen came struggling up to our door with a shopping bag full of 15 jars of peanut butter,” explains Grimaldi. “He told us that we had given them to him over the course of many visits, but that he didn’t want them and he was bringing them back. That helped us to finalize our decision about making the change.”

Some Choice Pantry models use a “supermarket” style approach in which individuals literally make their selections from the pantry’s shelves. NYCP, on the other hand, uses a high-tech system in which clients make their selections – with the help of a volunteer – using electronic tablets linked to the agency’s inventory system. There are pictures of all the available choices grouped by food group. “If it shows that we have Quaker Oats, then we have Quaker Oats,”

says Grimaldi. “The tablets can be set for multiple languages.”

All of the individuals NYCP serves are registered in the agency’s computer system and have their own electronic swipe card that is used for ordering. The order is then processed through the system to a location on the second floor where volunteers pack a bag with the individual’s customized order. “By the time they come upstairs, their order is usually ready,” says Grimaldi.

While the Choice Pantry is great for clients, it means that NYCP needs more volunteers on hand during the day – always a volunteer recruitment challenge. “We used to be able to pack bags the night before,” says Grimaldi. “Now we do it on-site, in real time, while the individuals are here.”

Members register their entire households in the pantry, identifying each individual and giving proof of address. Pantry members can receive one bag of groceries every two weeks with food sufficient to provide 3 meals per day for four days for each person in their household.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetables

As you might expect, getting food for pantry distributions and hot meals represents a significant chunk of NYCP’s budget – roughly 40% of FY2013’s \$4.3 million in total expenses. A sizeable share of this comes in the form of direct food donations from various government programs and nonprofit sources, including the Food Bank for New York City, City Harvest, and others. NYCP also operates its own food rescue program with two vans that collect donations from local restaurants, supermarkets and community organizations that conduct food drives on its behalf. “Some of these collections are regular. We pick-up from Trader Joes, Hot Bread Kitchen and ten different Chipotle’s. It’s amazing the commitment these partners have to minimizing waste, and we are proud to help them accomplish their goal to make sure that food gets to those that can use it. It’s perfectly good food,” says Grimaldi.

In 2010, NYCP launched its Fresh Food Initiative designed to increase distributions of fresh fruit and vegetables while simultaneously reducing levels of high-sodium canned and processed foods. The agency established relationships with farmers in the Hudson Valley to ensure a steady flow of fresh produce. While the result has been a dramatic increase in the nutritional quality of its food, the move has also increased its



Stephen Grimaldi

costs for purchased food. “By reducing our reliance on donated canned fruits and vegetables, we increased the overall portion of food that we purchase from 30% in 2009 to 37% last year,” says Grimaldi.

Live Healthy!

While New York Common Pantry’s distributions of fresh fruit and vegetables are invaluable, some of the local produce may be unfamiliar to members. Providing hands-on classes that show members how to prepare fresh produce in ways that are both healthy and delicious are also central to its mission. While New York Common Pantry has operated cooking and nutrition education classes since 2003, it launched the Live Healthy! program in the last few years to provide a comprehensive 360 degree approach to living a healthy lifestyle and doing so on a limited budget—something incredibly important to the people they serve. Toward that end the nutrition education and active living classes adopted a new curriculum in 2012. Families and caregivers are taught to create nutritious and satisfying meals – complete with copies of the recipes to take home. In addition, the children’s classes take field trips to local farmers’ markets and to a farm in New York’s Columbia County to enhance their learning experience.

In 2013, Live Healthy! Provided 216 classes and workshops, along with six trips to Katchkie Farm, and visited the Global Kitchen exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History.

The Volunteers

Volunteers play a critical role at New York Common Pantry.

“We couldn’t provide our services without them,” says Volunteer Coordinator Jen Winter. “Last year, we had almost 15,000 volunteers who donated approximately 40,000 hours of service.” Based on the nationally calculated rate for the value of volunteer service, that is the equivalent of approximately \$879,000 in staff salaries. “They accounted for 45% of our total labor hours,” says Winter.

NYCP utilizes volunteers in all of its various programs.

“On Wednesdays, for example, we serve breakfasts, have a pantry day, and serve dinner,” says Winter. “We need between 50 and 60 volunteers over the course of the day to run those three programs.”

Some of NYCP’s volunteers have been coming to the program for years. “They may come five days a week and some have been working with us longer than our own staff,” says Winter. Others may only volunteer one or two days a year, often part of “Days of Service” organized through corporate volunteer programs.

“It is very rewarding,” says Arturo Marquez who began volunteering with NYCP four years ago and now comes two days per week. “I think of it as food for the soul.”





A volunteer helps a pantry member make grocery selections using NYCP's electronic tablet.



NYCP's vans, which it uses in its own food rescue programs, travelled over 12,000 miles delivering more than 220,000 meals to residents in communities hardest hit by SuperStorm Sandy.



Volunteers play a critical role in all aspects of NYCP's operations.

It's Not Hunger! It's Poverty!

"Very early on, we realized that the real issue we were dealing with was poverty," says Grimaldi. "Food may be the one thing that brings people to the pantry, but it is only one of many services they need."

He notes that while soup kitchens and food pantries may be viewed as "emergency" food programs, increasingly they have become "supplemental" food programs. No longer primarily providing hot meals and/or groceries for homeless or indigent individuals who have no other source of food, they now are a way for many fami-

lies – including many working families – to fill in the food and nutritional gaps that result from trying to stretch less than living wage incomes or insufficient resources to meet the continually rising costs of food and housing in New York City.

"The cost of living is so high here," says Grimaldi. "You have to make 2.5 or 3.0 times the minimum wage to get by, and many say that is a conservative multiplier. People have to bridge these gaps and we are one way they can minimize their food costs."

In response, NYCP has developed a Help 365 series of programs designed to help individuals and families find other ways to supplement their incomes. "We screen every person who joins the Pantry through a resource calculator – ACCESS NYC -- to determine whether they are eligible for other benefits," says Grimaldi. In addition to food programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka Food Stamps) and WIC (Women, Infants and Children nutrition assistance), ACCESS NYC screens for financial assistance programs (e.g. PA Cash Assistance, the Earned Income Tax Credit, etc.), health insurance (Medicaid), housing programs (Section 8, Senior Citizen's Rent Increase Exemption, etc.), employment programs, child care and other family services, etc.

NYCP's Project Dignity offers optional case management services to provide even more intensive supports for individuals who come in for hot meals and may also utilize the agency's free showers and haircuts. "Our Coordinator who signs people in for meals gets to know them and will engage those whom he feels may be appropriate for this service," says Grimaldi. As an extra incentive, NYCP allows Project Dignity program participants to use NYCP as their mailing address. Clients are screened for eligibility to entitlement programs, just like with Project 365, but also receive ongoing support in terms of applications for services and referrals to other needed services.

And, NYCP arranges for other community-based services providers to bring their own staff on-site to meet the needs of clients. "We partner with a variety of other organizations to offer a wide range of services,"

says Grimaldi. Urban Justice Center provides legal services. The Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS) offers psychiatric services. Care for the Homeless provides medical services. New York Financial Action Network provides tax preparation. New York Legal Assistance Group provides financial counseling.

The payoff for these efforts by NYCP and its partners, as measured by the new benefits received by the agency's clients, is enormous. In FY2013, Help 365 and on-site partners helped pantry clients access \$4,543,520 million in new benefits. During the same period, Project Dignity's

Philanthropic Support

It takes a lot of support to provide close to 3 million meals for hungry New Yorkers on an annual basis. While New York Common Pantry receives significant quantities of donated foods from public and private sources, it requires even greater levels of financial support to both purchase an increasing share of nutritious fresh fruits and vegetables and cover operating expenses. Typically, NYCP gets approximately 40% of its annual budget from foundations and corporate grant makers. Another quarter comes from individual donors.

NYCP's one major fundraiser is its annual "Fill the Bag Benefit". This year, the event was held on March 4th at the Loeb Boathouse in Central Park and raised over \$700,000. Honorees included The Estée Lauder Companies Inc., represented by Deborah Krulewitch, Senior Vice President, Corporate Administration, who received the Corporate Partner Award; Michael Nachman, New York Common Pantry volunteer and Board Member, who received the Distinguished Partner Award; and The Buckley School, represented by Headmaster Gregory J. O'Melia, who received the Community Partner Award.



235 case management clients received over \$800,000 in new benefits. "That's a return of \$11 for every \$1 spent on Project Dignity and \$4.48 for every \$1 of expenditures for Help 365," says Grimaldi.

Beyond Yorkville

For years, NYCP has served individuals and families from far beyond the confines of Yorkville and Spanish Harlem. As noted, the agency has pantry members who live in 157 of New York City's 200 zip codes. Grimaldi attributes this willingness of its clients to travel great distances to the quality of NYCP's pantry and meals programs, particularly its emphasis on highly-nutritious fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as the growing need.

More recently, however, NYCP has been expanding the range of its services by reaching out to partner on programs and share its technical expertise with other community-based organizations across New York City.

"As soon as SuperStorm Sandy hit, we immediately wanted to respond," says Grimaldi. During the ten months following the storm, NYCP's staff traveled a total of 12,000 miles, serving more than 200,000 meals to over 16,000 people in areas hit hardest by the storm, including Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.

In certain cases, the relationships established with local community groups as part of this disaster response have now grown into stronger partnerships. The Action Center for Education and Community Development (ACECD), a youth agency in Far Rockaway, for example expressed an interest in developing their own emergency food program and asked NYCP for help. "We were very open to that," says Grimaldi. "They are an incredible organization. We have been assisting them in developing their own pantry relying on donated food. We've been helping them learn about food handling and storage, how to obtain food donations and how to secure more funding so they can become self-sustaining. Our goal is not to create another branch of New York Common Pantry, but rather to help other organizations become self-sustaining."

NYCP also began providing its Live Healthy! nutrition education classes at ACED and at other nonprofits, including

East Side House Settlement, Brightside Academy, and PS 109 in the Bronx.

NYCP also partners with the Food Bank for New York City in other important initiatives including the Community Response Program through which NYCP staff bring Help 365 entitlement benefit screening services using a Food Bank RV to emergency food programs and other community-based organizations.

Permanent Impact

It has been argued that, while a hot meal or a bag of groceries is critically important for a hungry individual or family at any given moment in time, emergency food programs merely are a band aid on the underlying problem of poverty. Grimaldi agrees that more comprehensive policy solutions are clearly necessary. "Our founders believed strongly in addressing a need and then putting ourselves out of business, and we retain that goal," he says.

In the meantime, however, he notes that the combination of services which New York Common Pantry provides is having a meaningful long term impact on the people who come to it for help.

"Every year, more than half of the people we serve are new and less than half have been coming to us previously," he explains. "That means that about 40% of the people we see one year no longer need to come back to us." In fact, NYCP can show that the more frequent a household's visits to the pantry in one year, the less frequent their visits are likely to be in the following year. "The more often we see them, the more likely they are to engage in services, access benefit programs and learn how to leverage their food dollars," says Grimaldi. "They are more likely to stabilize their lives, secure housing and get back into the workforce."

Looking ahead, however, it seems unlikely that New York Common Pantry will be put out of business any time soon. For the moment, the agency is seeking ways to accommodate continuing growth in the numbers of people seeking help – possibly through the addition of a fifth Pantry day. And, it is exploring plans to develop its own culinary arts vocational training and job placement program as another way to address the underlying reasons that force its men and women to seek help in the first place.