

HCS serves up new pantry space in BR

New addition at Anne M. Jeans School provides better access to more options for clients

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When HCS Family Services established a food pantry at Anne M. Jeans Elementary School in Burr Ridge in November 2016, the agency celebrated the pioneering achievement of housing such a facility in a school.

On Tuesday, HCS celebrated the grand opening of a dedicated space to help the food insecure population of southeast DuPage County.

"This is an area of particular need, and that's why we're so happy to be partnering with (Community Consolidated Elementary) District 180 to bring this concept to reality," Stan Cook, the nonprofit's executive director, said to those assembled for the grand opening. "There's a lot of economic need here, and there's also low supply and low access to healthy foods."

The new pantry space is part of a multi-million dollar addition at Anne M. Jeans. The expansion also includes a meeting room and a large community space available for local groups to use.

On a tour, Adam Mejorado, one of the pantry's managers, said clients come in every Wednesday from 5 to 6:30 p.m. Deliveries of donated food come in three times a week from supermarkets and twice a month from Northern Illinois Food Bank. The organization serves approximately 500 people weekly. More than 500,000 pounds of food were distributed in 2017.

A wall of double-door refrigerators contained milk, eggs and fresh produce. A freezer on the end served as the meat locker. Gleaming neatly ordered shelves with nonperishable groceries also had room for products such as light bulbs and diapers.

"We offer household items as well because, through the SNAP (supplemental nutrition assistance) program, if you can't eat it, you can't buy it," Mejorado explained.

He said working at the pantry is a special labor of love for him.

"As a child I actually used to get food from food pantries when I was in high school," he said. "It's so great to be able to give back."

Greg DiDomenico, president and chief executive officer of Community Memorial Foundation, a longstanding HCS partner, praised the opening.

"It's a great asset in our local community and a great way that our partners have come together," he said.

District 180 Superintendent Tom Schneider said this is one of only three school-based food pantries in Illinois. Weiwei Chang of Northern Illinois Food Bank underscored the value of that model.

"Food pantries coming into schools opens so many opportunities," he said. "This really helps reduce the stigmas that people face sometimes when they're seeking help."

Shazia Sultan, presi-



HCS Family Services held a grand opening celebration Tuesday for its new food pantry space at Anne M. Jeans Elementary School in Burr Ridge. The new facility provides more refrigerator/freezer capacity and more room for clients to access the shelves as they select items. Stan Cook, HCS executive director, told those gathered that hunger remains an acute problem in DuPage County. (Jim Slonoff photos)

dent of the Hinsdale Junior Woman's Club, which provides both financial and volunteer support to HCS, expressed excitement about

the upgraded space.

Client Josephine Infante, a single working mother of two, said the food pantry is a lifeline for her.

"This gives me stability for my children and I when there's no more money," she told the audience. "I'm just very grateful."