

Kosher SuperPantry: Addressing a quiet need

BY TODD ERKEL

Jewish Healthcare Foundation

Kelly Labelle huddles a small troop of volunteers around a long, sturdy table stacked six cases high with nonperishable kosher food. She passes out assignments with vocal inflections that range somewhere between class-trip chaperone and drill sergeant: "You're sauce, you're pineapple, you're peaches," Labelle announces, moving down the food pantry assembly line.

When she comes to a gap in the line, she turns to 10-year-old Elan: "Do you want to be a vegetable?" Labelle says. Elan, more than a little embarrassed by the question, shrugs his approval.

Labelle, an experienced family counselor and program director with Family Resources, is pantry coordinator for the new Squirrel Hill Kosher SuperPantry.

The SuperPantry opened in late October with a goal to provide supplemental food for 75-100 families, seniors and other households. Almost immediately, demand outstripped those expectations and the SuperPantry, in its second quarter of operation, now serves 191 households.

Standing in the second floor hallway of the Wightman School Community Center, surrounded by a sea of filled food bags, Labelle pauses to catch her breath. "We knew from experience working with larger families that there was a need for supplemental and emergency food, especially kosher food" she says. "But nobody really knew the depth or reach of that demand."

Back in the packing room, the all-volunteer crew reaches the halfway mark on its way to filling an order for 72 food bags, scheduled for delivery the next day. Canned fruits, vegetables and juices hit the bags in a rhythmic thud, while bags of pasta, coffee and cereal bars fill in with a snare-like rattle.

Angela Kline, 26, an attorney with Bluming/Gusky, is back for more community service after a previous stint as a Vista volunteer working with families in the Jewish community.

"I was not totally surprised to hear of a food pantry opening in Squirrel Hill," Kline says. "I knew that many households struggled to make ends meet, especially larger families."

Churchill resident Ruth Silverman was surprised to learn of a hunger problem in the Jewish community, confirmed by a

1994 Jewish Healthcare Foundation study that found while 10% of households met poverty guidelines, only four percent were receiving supplemental food and other services.

"Some problems feel too big for one person to solve," Silverman said. "But when you hear about hunger, you think to yourself there must be something we can do."

The Jewish Healthcare Foundation approved a three-year grant to establish the Kosher SuperPantry, and convened representatives from Jewish Family and Children Services, Hebrew Free Loan, Jewish Family Assistance Fund, Jewish Community Center, Jewish Association on Aging, the Rabbinical Council and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank in project planning. Rainbow Kitchen and Family Resources were contracted to provide technical and operational support.

Silverman is on a scouting mission for the Singularly Yours singles network, here to volunteer and to report back to the group about future community service opportunities.

Labelle explains that all food recipients must complete an intake process, either in person or in the case of frail seniors, by phone. Anyone who lives within the 15217 zip code and meets income requirements is eligible, along with those living outside the neighborhood who require Kosher food. Households receive food once a month, more frequently in special circumstances. "The intake helps to establish specific needs," Labelle says.

As the morning winds to a close, Labelle choreographs the loading of grocery bags into the Wightman School elevator. Each is marked with a number to designate family size, and great care is taken to keep the bags from mixing. Labelle personally delivers the food to some families, just one of the ways that the SuperPantry goes out of its way to protect client confidentiality.

"We know from the intake that many people still attach a stigma to this kind of direct assistance. We go out of our way to protect confidentiality in order to establish trust."

For information or a confidential interview, contact the Squirrel Hill Kosher SuperPantry at 421-2708. To volunteer, call the Jewish Volunteer Connection at 421-0398.