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Suburban food pantry a refuge during high inflation: ‘If I could get on my knees, I’d thank them on my knees’

By Zareen Syed | Aug 09, 2022

Seventy-four year old Jeanette Benkowski, a resident of suburban Westmont, walked through the doors of Downers Grove Area FISH on Friday, shoulders dropped slightly but spirits high.

“I’m happy that I’m here and getting some food,” she said, smiling behind her KN95 mask. “I can’t afford to buy things. A lot of the things I used to eat, I just can’t anymore.”

As inflation continues to plague shoppers, the impact of soaring grocery store prices is being felt most excruciatingly by those whose limited income requires them to choose between milk or eggs, and in Benkowski’s case, a physician-recommended nutritional supplement that hovers around \$10 for a pack of six.

“My doctor wants me to drink two bottles of Ensure everyday to gain some weight because I’ve been sick, but the price of that has skyrocketed,” she said. “I can’t get it, but I do need it.”

Benkowski is one of dozens who line the parking lot of 4341 Saratoga Avenue in Downers Grove on Tuesdays and Fridays each week to collect pantry staples from a group of dedicated volunteers at Downers Grove Fish who are grappling with more families to feed and fewer people donating than in the past.



Some food areas are empty at the The Downers Grove Area FISH pantry, Downers Grove Ill. Friday, August 6, 2022

“We’re not only seeing an increase in families that need our help, but we’re also seeing a definite decrease in the number of donations we’re receiving, whether it’s monetary or food items,” said Deb Aguzino, food pantry co-manager at Downers Grove Fish. “It’s been very difficult to maneuver.”

Since launching in 1969 to present day, the volunteer-led grass roots organization has seen a 700% increase in the number of community members they serve. In the early days, said Aguzino, they helped 15 food insecure families a week out of a basement. At last count, Downers Grove Fish serves 145 families every week during its 5 hours of food distribution, amounting to a 36% increase from Jan. 2022 to July 2022.



Some spaces are empty at the The Downers Grove Area FISH pantry, Downers Grove Ill. Friday, August 6, 2022

The food pantry hosts two distribution slots each week — two hours on Tuesday, from 4 p.m.-6 p.m. and three hours on Friday, from 8:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m.

“The pantry helps a lot because my husband is the only one that is working right now,” said Westmont resident Maria Perez. “They give us everything we need. Even if we don’t mark it on [the sheet], you write it down, they’ll give it to you.”

Downers Grove Fish is a “choice pantry” where people can circle on a grocery list 20 items they need for their household size. When a client pulls up in the parking lot, a volunteer hands over a clipboard and a list, comes back in a few minutes to collect it, then a volunteer “shopper” will gather the circled items from the pantry’s racks of food supply.

The flip side of the shopping list is in Mandarin to accommodate the pantry’s 25% Asian American clientele.

The list changes twice a week depending on inventory and usually has between 60 and 80 items split into categories of meat, soups, canned vegetables, breakfast foods, canned fish, dry goods, baby/child, personal care items and more. On Friday, under the fresh produce section of the list, bananas and oranges were crossed off by 10 a.m.

Perez, 56, who is unable to work because of a persistent arm and leg pain, has five children ages



Volunteer Alen Niebes delivers needed food to a client waiting in a vehicle during Downers Grove Area FISH food pantry distribution day

five, seven, 16, 17 and 20. Meat is her most-needed item from the pantry, followed by eggs and milk.

Her family has been coming to the Downers Grove pantry for two years.

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“They are never mad, never say ‘no’ and they help us a lot. I really appreciate all the people that work here,” Perez said, adding in Spanish that food items can be unbelievably costly for a single-income household.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, food prices in the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin area rose 11% over the last 12 months.

Like Perez and so many others glaring at the checkout screen, Downers Grove resident Helen Lundquist, 79, noticed her dollar isn’t going as far as it used to.



Volunteer Genna Jones fulfills a client's request for fresh fruits and vegetables during Downers Grove Area FISH pantry food distribution day, Downers Grove Ill. Friday, August 6, 2022. Jones has been a pantry volunteer for two years

“I see such an increase in my utilities, insurance, car insurance — everything has just gone up dramatically, not to mention the grocery stores, so this is really a blessing,” Lundquist said on Friday.

Lundquist receives a limited income through Social Security benefits, but after Medicare expenses and other bills, there isn't much left for groceries, she said.

“Everything is expensive and there's nothing coming in,” she said. “As a matter of fact I was online this morning seeing if there was some kind of work I could get from home.”

When she was younger, Lundquist worked as a secretary for Morton Salt in downtown Chicago, but is hoping to find opportunities to sell handmade items to earn extra cash.

“I'm so glad I found them. If I could get on my knees, I'd thank them on my knees.”



Volunteer Sharon Leggett, left, looks over client's food request during Downers Grove Area FISH food pantry distribution day, Downers Grove Ill. Friday, August 6, 2022

Since she lives by herself, stopping by the pantry every two weeks is sufficient enough to stock up on the basics, Lundquist said.

“I'm so glad I found them,” she added. “If I could get on my knees, I'd thank them on my knees.”

On non-distribution days, Downers Grove Fish volunteers pick up items from church food drives, local community drives and food rescue partners, like Jewel-Osco who donates items that aren't suitable for retail. These might include dented or bruised fruits and vegetables, cut fruit, and meat that's almost hitting the sell-by date. The items are a welcome acquisition for Aguzino who keeps track of everything on the shelf.

“For example, [based on lists] I know I need at least 30 bags of white rice on the shelf for distribution day and we don't want anyone to be disappointed that we're out of something they need,” Aguzino said.

Throughout the week, Aguzino notes which products frequently need restocking to better inform donors about what's needed.

“People always ask what to bring to a food pantry, we always say think outside of the can of corn or can of green beans,” Aguzino said.

Aside from essentials and high-priced meats, the top five items people need are feminine care products, shampoo and conditioner, toothpaste and toothbrushes.

Aguzino also reaches into monetary funds to buy items not covered by SNAP benefits, like cleaning supplies or toilet paper, as well as canned tuna, sugar-free and low sodium items, gluten-free choices, bagged lettuce and carrots.

“We have found that the families we serve are just like us: they want to eat healthy, they want fresh produce, and eggs and milk. That is where a lot of our money goes,” Aguzino said. “We know some of our elderly rely on Ensure, so we try to purchase it whenever we can, too.”

One of Aguzino’s missions while serving the community is to dispel some of the myths surrounding food pantries through her connection with clients that live near and far.

Recently, a man who drives for Lyft had a large crack in his windshield when he pulled up to the food pantry parking lot.

“We said ‘oh my god what happened,’ and he said, ‘well I can’t give rides until it’s fixed,’” Aguzino said. “This helped pay for his windshield being repaired. And now we don’t see him anymore, so that’s a good thing.”

“It’s not just the unemployed and the homeless that are always coming to the food pantry, it’s

“That’s all it is. It’s a bump in the road and they can get back on their feet from here.”

some of our folks who are seniors living on Social Security, people with a limited income, the SNAP recipients — and sometimes, people encounter a bump in the road,” Aguzino added. “That’s all it is. It’s a bump in the road and they can get back on their feet from here.”

For so many, the food pantry has become a safe space — a no-questions-asked refuge where basic necessities are a human right, not a luxury.

Benkowski, who lives alone with little to no family support, leans on Downers Grove FISH for more than just a bag of groceries.

“Thank heavens for these people, they’re here no matter what the weather is like — hot, cold, raining, snowing, blizzard. I look forward to not only getting the food, but the camaraderie — I can talk to them, ask them questions,” she said. “It makes me feel good and it makes me feel less lonely.”

For more information on Downers Grove Area FISH, including donations and volunteer opportunities, visit downersgrovefish.org.