





# Delivering joy

## Peoples Food Pantry a lifeline for those in need

The Peoples Food Pantry's volunteers and lone part-time paid employee make an army.

They do battle year-round in the local war on hunger and food insecurity, but the largest engagements await – Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“The need is so much more, people's budgets are stretched in so many ways,” says Frances Rohr, a longtime pantry co-coordinator. “We see a lot more people at the holidays.”

As it is, the pantry regularly provides food for 400 people – guests – every two weeks at The North Parish of North Andover Unitarian Universalist Church.

Not just canned and boxed items. An estimated 30% of the food distributed is fresh produce, and sometimes chicken and fish, says Jennifer Cordes, pantry president and co-coordinator.

Guests line up at the door at 6:15 a.m., well before the pantry's 7 a.m. opening on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month.

“When I get here in the morning,” Cordes says, “there are about 70 people standing outside in the dark.”

Invariably, some of the early birds help the volunteers ready for 3½ hours of energy-filled food distribution, from 7 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

“Organized chaos,” Rohr calls it.

It's intense, a lot of moving parts, people hustling to and fro, replenishing stock, breaking down boxes, helping older people load food.

Actually, the rush starts the day before.

Pantry volunteers ferry 10,000 pounds of food from the Seacoast Regional Food Hub in Salisbury, where food provided by The Greater Boston Food Bank and other partners is stored.

“Since signing on with the hub and The Greater Boston Food Bank (in January), we get three times as much food,” Cordes says.



**Frances Rohr, treasurer of Peoples Food Pantry, organizes meal boxes to be distributed to families in need. On the opposite page, Rohr is joined by Jennifer Cordes, left, president of the pantry, and Lana Swiec, a manager, outside The North Parish of North Andover Unitarian Universalist Church, which houses the pantry.**

### An enduring demand

From November 2024 through March 2025, The Greater Boston Food Bank and Mass General Brigham – supported by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education – surveyed more than 3,000 adults across the state.

The results, in the GBFB statewide food access report, states that in 2024, more than 1 in 3 Massachusetts households, 37% – approximately 2 million adults – reported food insecurity at some point over the past 12 months.

Food insecurity is the experience of being unable to afford enough food to eat or worrying about where one's next meal will come from.

In Essex County, 34% of the population experiences food insecurity, the report says.

Even North Andover, where, according to U.S. Census Bureau information, the median income is \$134,319 and the median property value is \$621,100, the food insecurity rate is 14%, Jennifer Cordes says.

“Food insecurity spiked during the pandemic, and it unfortunately has not gotten better in our state,” says Gary Roy, assistant director of public relations at GBFB.

*By* TERRY DATE • *Photos by* CARL RUSSO

Stop & Shop donates 30 big banana boxes of food before the distribution dates, as well. Local farmers and bakeries also contribute.

Need, however, surges on the pantry days at year's end, during the holidays, says Rohr, joined on this early October afternoon by Cordes and the pantry's part-time employee, Lana Swiec, of North Andover, hired in May.

They sit in the Flex Room at The North Parish, 190 Academy Road.

On food days, guests enter the parish hall, upstairs, register and file downstairs past the small food storage room, waiting to enter the Flex Room.

It's empty now, but the long tables at the perimeter will be stacked with food on pantry days.

"They're looking over each other's shoulder, trying to see what we have," Swiec says. "And when they see that we have chicken or fish, and they see that we have fresh produce, lots of bread and peanut butter, you know, and things that kids like, like cereal, they get very happy."

Volunteers are an army in motion but take note of the people they are serving.

This offers its own rewards.

"You see suddenly their face and their happiness, and I am so happy, you know, seeing them in that moment," Swiec says. "We know that they're leaving here and we made their day."

The pantry, which was founded in 1992, has some 60 to 75 volunteers, a number of whom have been helping out for decades, Cordes says.

There's a rapport between the guests and the pantry volunteers.

One man, who is hard of hearing, comes with his service dog, an affable German shepherd named Effie.

### Volunteers prepare to serve guests at the Peoples Food Pantry.



### Fresh bread and produce are ready to be distributed farmers market style.

The volunteers bring treats for Effie.

One guest is a knitter and last winter crocheted colorful hats for volunteers, Cordes says.

The pantry just received a donation of toy cars for the guests' children.

But food is the sustaining product that guests come to the pantry for, and the organizers fear that the need will outstrip the supply.

Fortunately, that hasn't happened yet.

Last year on the pantry day closest to Thanksgiving, there were more than 500 guests.

The volunteers wouldn't be surprised to see the number eclipse 600 this year.

Rohr, a retired nutritionist who worked at Boston Children's Hospital, grew up one of 10 kids in a home where her mom always set a place at the Thanksgiving table for a person in need.

"Despite how busy she was, Mother always made a meal for a neighbor or friend who was sick or injured," Rohr

says. "I learned early on that sharing food was an act of love and compassion."

Still, the fear remains that the pantry won't be able to meet the need in the future, especially considering recent cuts to food programs.

Major reductions to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program that took effect Oct. 1 are projected by the Congressional Budget Office to leave 2.4 million Americans without food benefits.

"And the idea of having to send somebody away with nothing is heartbreaking, quite frankly," Rohr says.

Swiec sees the number of people in need and wonders what the solution is and how this will end.

The goal remains to feed the need, Cordes says.

"Making sure that we're feeding anybody that comes through the door, whether they're from Lawrence or Methuen or North Andover or Andover or Georgetown," she says. 🙏