



Pearline Hudson, 62, gets supplemental food from the St. James Food Pantry.

“Do I eat or do I pay my medical bills?”

That’s a question 62-year-old Pearline Hudson needed to face after being diagnosed with breast cancer recently. Pearline is quickly using up her savings paying medical bills and can’t afford to buy all the food she needs.

“I have so many medical bills so right now I’m kind of struggling,” she said.

But, with the help of the St. James Food Pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository agency in the Douglas neighborhood, Pearline can focus on getting better and not worry about where she’s going to get her next meal. Pearline has been getting fresh fruit, vegetables and meat from the pantry for the last five months.

“Despite my situation, I make sure to stay positive,” she said. “Places like (St. James) help me have a better quality of life.”

Pearline is not alone. St. James pantry coordinator Cathy Moore said the agency has seen an increase over the last few months in the number of older adults it serves.

“Our overall clients have leveled out, but we continue to see more older adults coming in needing food assistance,” she said.

The pantry serves more than 1,500 families per month.

“There are other people here who have problems like mine, but you just have to look at it in a positive light and go from there,” Pearline said.



Dave Blakeman, right, loads bags full of fresh fruits and vegetables into his cart at a Producemobile distribution in Richton Park. (Photo By Charlie Westerman/Greater Chicago Food Depository)

Dave Blakeman, 53, always loved tinkering, inventing and fixing things. He was an engineer for 30 years, until he was diagnosed with colon cancer two years ago.

“I never expected to go from having a full-time job to living day-to-day, wondering how I was going to feed my family,” he said.

Dave is currently undergoing treatment and can no longer work. He is quickly spending his savings paying medical bills and taking care of his family in Frankfort Square, a southern suburb. It’s a struggle for Dave to pay for food, especially fresh fruit and vegetables.

He gets apples, oranges, bananas, onions, and corn from the Greater Chicago Food Depository’s Producemobile distribution in Richton Park.

“This definitely fills in the gaps,” Dave said. “I have a wife and two boys at home and with this food I know they’ll get the nutrition they need.”

As for Dave’s penchant for engineering, he hasn’t given it up despite being unable to work.

“I recently found some parts for a remote controlled plane, and fixed one up,” he said, smiling. “I fly it around the backyard. It keeps me occupied.”

The Greater Chicago Food Depository’s Producemobile delivers food to people in need all year long. In Fiscal Year 2012-13, one-third of the Food Depository’s distribution was fresh fruits and vegetables.

Donate to the Food Depository and make a difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children in our community.



Michael Mooney has been volunteering at St. Ignatius Church's Food Pantry since 2001.

From fixing helicopters in the Army to volunteering in his community, Michael Mooney has lived a life of service.

Michael, 53, served in the Army as a helicopter mechanic during Desert Storm. He returned to Chicago in 2001 unable to work and needed help making ends meet.

"I just wasn't able to make it to the end of the month," he said. "I just didn't have the money to buy enough food."

Michael found assistance at the St. Ignatius Church's food pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository agency in the Rogers Park neighborhood. Michael started coming regularly, receiving fresh fruits, vegetables and groceries from the pantry.

He soon realized how valuable the agency was to the community, and decided to volunteer. 12 years later, Michael rarely uses the pantry, but continues to volunteer on Wednesdays and Fridays.

"For many, this pantry is the difference between being hungry and feeding your family. I'm glad to be part of making a difference," Michael said.

The pantry serves nearly 600 families per month and is open Wednesdays 2-4 p.m. and Fridays 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.

"I'm new to all of this," 30-year-old Susan Goodle said as she glanced around a room full of giggling children, playing with brightly colored toys. Susan was at a Greater Chicago Food Depository Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Outreach event at 5535 W. 87th St. in Oak Lawn. She was applying for SNAP benefits for the first time.

"I'm struggling right now," she said. "Over the past few months, I've been having a really hard time."

Susan works about 16 hours per week as a Certified Nursing Assistant at a local hospital, but since her recent divorce, her income is barely enough to pay the rent and utility bills. She is also paying for college, studying full-time to get her nursing degree.

Susan knows she will need help buying food soon. Not only because of her debt, but because she is also pregnant.

"I need to make sure that my child is going to have enough to eat," she said.

She has come to the right place. The Food Depository's SNAP Outreach initiatives help clients connect with federal benefits by answering questions about SNAP and helping individuals fill out the 11-page application.

"SNAP Outreach is an integral part of the Food Depository's mission," said Graciela Rodriguez, SNAP Outreach Supervisor. "In Illinois, 20 percent of people eligible for SNAP aren't enrolled. We want to make sure eligible individuals have the opportunity to benefit from the program."

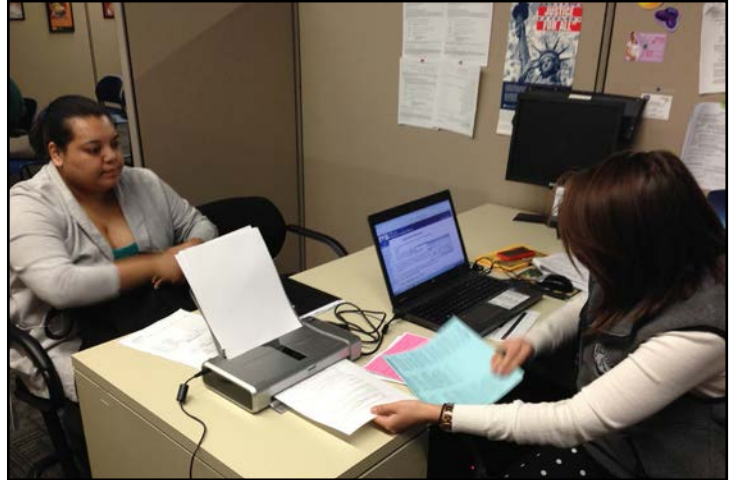
In fiscal year 2011-2012, the Food Depository's SNAP Outreach team helped provide assistance to 3,037 households. This year's goal is more than 4,000.

Back in Oak Lawn, Food Depository SNAP Outreach Coordinator Kathy Wroblewska determined that Susan was about \$50 over the monthly gross income limit for a household of one, but they both decided it was a good idea to submit the application.

"When Susan's baby is born, she will have a household of two and based on her income, she would be eligible at that time for SNAP benefits," Kathy said.

Clients are normally notified about their SNAP application two months after submission. In the meantime, Susan is given a list of Food Depository agencies in her area, to help make ends meet while she waits.

"I live check to check right now, but getting help applying for SNAP gives me a little more hope for my future, and for my baby's future," Susan said.



Susan Goodle, left, applies for SNAP with the help of AmeriCorps Member Kathy Wroblewska.

In the food pantry line at Fraternite Notre Dame in Chicago's Austin neighborhood, seven-year-old Jada Dunkentell just wanted to practice her gymnastics. "Do you want to see me do a cartwheel into the splits?" she asked the crowd waiting for boxes of food.

Without waiting for an answer, she bounced down the sidewalk, flipped over, and landed in a patch of grass.

She quickly exclaimed, "See! I did it!"

"You did great," said Jada's mother, 44-year-old Jacqueline Dunkentell, who stood nearby in the line. Jacqueline injured her back about a year ago and has not been able to work since. She struggles to afford food and comes to Fraternite Notre Dame, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency, once a week.



Jacqueline Dunkentell (right) and her daughter, Jada, wait in line at the Fraternite Notre Dame food pantry.

"This has helped me make ends meet and this keeps my kids from going hungry," she said.

Jacqueline previously worked as a nursing assistant and security guard. She receives \$200 per month in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and gets shelf-stable food, meat, fruit and vegetables from the food pantry.

"When I lost my job we weren't able to buy all the meat we needed, but this has helped immensely," she said.

The pantry is open on Wednesdays from 3-5 p.m., but pantry coordinator Sister Marie Virginia expects to stay past 8 p.m., until everyone is served.

"The need is just so great in this community," she said. "We serve about 350 individuals per week and it's just always busy."

Thanks to the food pantry, while Jacqueline rehabs her back and looks for jobs, she knows she'll be able to provide enough food for Jada and her other two children.

"This place, these people have been a blessing," she said. "I'm not sure where we'd be without it."

Since Elena lost her job five years ago, she has been focused on feeding her children. And her children have been focused on feeding others.

It's Wednesday, and three of Elena's children – 13-year-old Guillermo, 12-year-old Cecilya and 10-year-old Sophia – are unloading boxes of food at the St. Ignatius Church food pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in Rogers Park.

The three kids move in unison, as Cecilya unloads a box full of fresh pears from the truck and quickly hands it off to Guillermo. "Pears coming down!" He says, before sliding the box down a conveyor belt into the waiting hands of Sophia, who moves the box to a shelf.



From left to right, Guillermo, Sophia, and Cecilya have been volunteering at the St. Ignatius Church food pantry all summer.

Guillermo has been volunteering at the pantry for two years, while his sisters started this summer. Their motivation for helping out is simple.

"Sharing with other people is better than keeping everything to yourself," says 10-year-old Sophia, who also organized a food drive at her school two years ago.

Elena teaches her children the value of sharing with others, because she's familiar with the positive impact kindness can have. She fell on hard times about five years ago when she was laid off from her job at a vehicle repair shop. Before that, she worked 10 years in retail as a store manager. Now, she feeds her family with the help of the food pantry and the \$520 per month she gets in SNAP benefits.

"The kids like fruits and vegetables, but they're so expensive," Elena says. "Food prices keep going up. Even milk is expensive, and with the cereal the kids eat, we go through milk in just a few days."

Elena works about 15 hours per week, making \$8.75 an hour. Her income barely takes care of the necessities, which is why she turns to the pantry for fruit, vegetables and shelf-stable food for her children.

"The pantry helps feed my children. It helps keep my kids' stomachs full," she says. "I try to make things stretch to the best of my abilities and work from there."

In a few weeks, the children will go back to school. They will be missed at the pantry, but there's no doubt they will be back next summer.

"Without them, the unloading process would take twice as long," says pantry coordinator Kathy Morris. "They're good kids. They make the summer bright."



Steve Polzak relies on the Greater Chicago Food Depository Mobile Pantry in Sauk Village for fruit, vegetables and shelf-stable goods.

Steve Polzak, 58, grasped the handle of a rolling cooler with one hand, and his cane in the other. It was a radiant, clear afternoon in South Suburban Sauk Village, and Steve was visiting a Greater Chicago Food Depository Mobile Pantry at Emmanuel Church.

Steve received fresh carrots, potatoes, onions, collard greens and bread at the distribution. He and his wife go to the distribution every few months, since times got tough.

"I didn't have any breakfast today because we just didn't have any food," Steve said. "This helps tremendously."

Steve got into a car accident about 10 years ago and severely injured his back. He had to go on permanent disability and was no longer able to work in his job at a warehouse. Since the accident, paying for related medical issues has drained his family's savings account.

Steve's wife was also laid off from her job in information technology three years ago, and has since gone on disability. Swamped by mortgage payments and medical bills, the couple has trouble affording food.

"The only thing I've eaten recently was a scrambled egg sandwich," Steve said. "That's holding up right now pretty well but if it weren't for this I'm not sure what we'd be doing."

Steve is relying heavily on the Mobile Pantry this month because he is in the process of renewing his SNAP benefits and is out of funds on his family's Link card.

"There's literally nothing in our pantry right now," Steve said. "Now that we have this food, we'll be able to pull something together for dinner tonight and for the rest of the week."



Maureen Ryan chooses a bag of vegetables at the Union Ave. UMC Church food pantry.

Maureen Ryan used to have a steady, secure job in accounting and credit collecting. “I was the best credit collector in the City of Chicago,” she laughed.

That was about 10 years ago. After losing the job, Maureen hasn’t been able to find consistent work. She now works odd jobs and cleans houses to make ends meet. Between her part-time income and \$126 per month in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, she doesn’t make enough to support her disabled husband and two teenage daughters.

“They don’t give enough for food stamps. It’s just not enough,” she said.

To fill in the gaps, Maureen and her husband get fruit, vegetables, meat, bread, and canned goods at the Union Avenue UMC Church food pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository agency in the South Side neighborhood of Canaryville.

“Since my husband has been disabled, the doctors want him to eat better, so I get my vegetables here, because they’re just too expensive otherwise.”

Maureen and her husband have been coming to the pantry for a year.

“It’s tough to scrounge up money to buy food these days,” Maureen said. “That’s why this is such a blessing for us.”

Every month, the pantry serves more than 400 individuals, and the Ryans’ story is all too familiar to pantry coordinator Ray Carey. “We’re working with desperate people now,” he said. “People have lost their jobs and are struggling through no fault of their own. That story needs to be told.”

The clients who come to the St. Columbanus Church Food Pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency, call her “Dee Dee,” but her full name is Marguarite Smith. She is a volunteer and client who greets everyone at the pantry with a jovial smile and a hug. She’s always focused on making everyone in line feel comfortable and welcomed, because she knows times are tough.

“Some of the people that come here can’t even afford lettuce to make a salad,” she said. “So the vegetables and other food we get here are great.”



Margarite has been volunteering at the pantry for eight years, ever since she had to go on disability soon after her husband also became disabled. Unable to work, the couple struggles to eat on less than \$300 per month in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and food from the pantry.

“Everyone that comes here is just so happy to get meat and chicken,” she said. “I get so many calls from people saying they can cook so much more because of what we receive here.”

St. Columbanus is able to serve approximately 500 clients per week, including Marguarite, because of Food Depository support, including thousands of pounds of food distributed to the agency every month, grants, and technical assistance.

Part of the food the pantry receives is from the Food Depository’s Food Rescue program.

“With the Food Rescue program, we can give clients another source of protein,” said pantry coordinator LaVerne Morris. “It truly makes a difference.”

Food Rescue provides Food Depository member agencies with quality meat, dairy products, and produce recovered from grocery stores that would otherwise have been discarded. St. Columbanus joined the program in 2009.

“The pantry used to give us just canned goods, but now everyone’s happy to get the meat,” Marguarite said. In fiscal year 2012-2013, the Food Depository’s Food Rescue program distributed 10.2 million pounds of food – an increase of more than one million pounds from the previous year.

Four-year-old Mackenzie skipped up to the front door of the Operation Blessing Food Pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in south suburban Crestwood, on a sunny Thursday morning. In one hand, she held her mother's pointer finger, and with the other she carried a plastic bag full of fluffy dolls.

"Here you go!" she grinned, emphatically handing the bag to a pantry volunteer, eager to make her donation. Today, Mackenzie is at the pantry to drop off the dolls. Yesterday, she was at the pantry with her mother, Laura Grabfelder, to get food.



Laura Grabfelder and her daughter Mackenzie receive food from Operation Blessing Food Pantry once per month.

Laura has been coming to the pantry once a month for more than a year. She has a full-time job at an insurance company, but still has trouble supporting herself and Mackenzie.

"I barely make enough to pay rent or pay for much else let alone food," Laura said. "Getting food from the pantry is a big help."

Laura recently got a 50 cent raise at work, which equates to approximately \$80 more per month for the family. Because of the raise, Laura's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits dropped from \$200 per month to only \$27 per month.

"It's tough to get by, even with the job," she said. "In fact, after this, we'll be stopping at a few thrift stores to get clothes for Mackenzie, because she's going into preschool this year."

The pantry serves more than 1,000 people per month.

"There's always a need in this community," said pantry assistant John Whithall. "Some people that come here have degrees, but can't find jobs. There's just nothing available."

With support from the Food Depository, Operation Blessing served 50,000 people last year. While addressing a massive need in the community, they never lose sight of small donations like Mackenzie's.

After dropping off the dolls, John handed Mackenzie some peanut butter crackers, which she happily grabbed.

She took a bite and her blue eyes lit up.

"This is the first time she's had peanut butter," Laura said. "That's why this pantry means so much to us."



Jill and Chester have been coming to the Niles Township Pantry for nearly two years.

Jill Brenner and her son Chester take a cab to the Niles Township Food Pantry in Skokie twice a month. It's a stretch for them to pay the cab fare, but if they didn't go, they wouldn't eat.

"Before we started coming here, we were used to one meal a day, because that's all we could afford," Chester said.

Jill has been on disability for the last five years. Previously, she was an accountant. Her son is also disabled, after having multiple heart surgeries. Jill is not eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits because of what she receives from disability. But, she still has difficulty affording food because most of her income is spent on rent.

"Food is not cheap these days," Jill said. "It has been rough the last couple of years for us, but the pantry has been a godsend."

Jill and Chester regularly receive meat, fresh fruit, vegetables, canned goods, and bread from the pantry, which serves approximately 3,000 families per month.

"It's been a lifesaver for us, literally," Jill said.

For Chester, 21, the pantry is not only a source of nutritious food; it is a way to build strength and confidence. "It definitely saved the holidays for us last year, because we wouldn't have had any food otherwise. But besides just the holidays, on a monthly basis, it lets me feel pride and gives me a sense of hope."



Lillian White receives groceries from St. Cyprian's Food Pantry.

Lillian White paused before pushing her cart full of groceries out the door of St. Cyprian's Food Pantry on the northwest side of Chicago. It was raining heavily, and she hoped it would slow down enough for her to load her car.

She carried a whole chicken, ground beef, fresh fruit, canned goods, cereal, and other assorted items from the food pantry.

"This helps me feed everyone," she said. "Sometimes, you just don't have any money for food. That's basically where we are."

Lillian, 68, lives with her son, daughter-in-law, and their two children. While the parents do work, bills have overburdened the family, and they are now on the verge of losing their home. There is little money left over to buy food.

"I try to make the best of everything I get at the pantry," she said. "We stretch it over the course of a month and it really helps."

St. Cyprian's serves more than 600 families per month – many with at least one person who has a job. "The economy is so bad right now, you just can't do anything," Lillian said. "We have to eat. We wouldn't be able to afford food if it weren't for the pantry."

As the rain calms, Lillian pushes her cart out to her car, sloshing through the parking lot.

"So many people think that if you're coming to a food pantry, you're poor. You're homeless. But that's not the case. Nowadays it's because you just can't make ends meet, and that's us."



Shevel Pickett receives food from the Maple Morgan Park Food Pantry.

Shevel Pickett and her husband own a home and a car. They live in the Morgan Park neighborhood on the far South Side of Chicago, amongst Victorian-style homes and shaded streets. Five years ago, Shevel would never have expected to be in need of help from a food pantry. Instead, she was hoping to be well on her way to retirement by 2013.

But, Shevel's plans had to be put on hold when she was laid off from her job in human resources in 2008. She has been working temporary assignments sporadically ever since, but has not found another full-time position.

"I've heard people use the phrase, 'Too young to retire, too old to get hired,'" she said. "It's hard because it seems like people are looking for younger employees and not me."

Shevel receives unemployment and her husband is on disability, but the couple still can barely afford food. Once a month, they go to the Maple Morgan Park Food Pantry.

"The pantry has been a wonder," she said. "It helps a great deal. I'm able to make meals that end up lasting a long time."

For pantry director Lillian Hennings, seeing people like Shevel at the pantry is a common occurrence.

"We've seen a huge increase in our numbers over the last few years," she said. "The need is significant in this community and the economy is bad. It's tough to get a job right now, so people come to the pantry."



Marco Lopez graduated from the Chicago's Community Kitchens program in September.

Marco Lopez, 22, is driven, and passionate about succeeding. He always aspired to be a chef, but his plans were derailed in March, when he was let go from his job at a catering company. Unable to find a job and struggling to make ends meet, he discovered the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Chicago's Community Kitchens program.

"If I hadn't found CCK, I might still be looking for a job. There's just nothing available right now," he said.

Chicago's Community Kitchens is a 14-week foodservice training program for unemployed and underemployed individuals. The program gives students a solid foundation in food preparation, as well as professional skills training, such as resume building.

Marco saw CCK as a lifeline, a chance to improve his skills while opening up new opportunities in his future.

"I just want to get better at what I'm doing," he said.

During the 14-week program, Marco needed to arrive at the Food Depository at 7:30 a.m. He worked in the kitchen, learning how to chop, grill, sauté, and measure food. He also worked in the classroom, passing required culinary math tests.

After finishing the day around 3:30 p.m., Marco started the second half of his day – to make money to support himself, he delivered newspapers from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. every day, before getting up around 5 a.m. to start over again.

"It wasn't easy," he said. "But it was absolutely worth it. Getting more experience in the kitchen is really important to me."

Marco's efforts were rewarded. He graduated from the Chicago's Community Kitchens program in September and is now working at the Farmhouse Restaurant in the River North neighborhood. "It's all about being dedicated. This program gave me more experience, more confidence and a drive to be better. It was great."



Monica Galvan receives fresh fruit, vegetables, and protein from the Church of the Holy Spirit Food Pantry in Schaumburg to help support her family.

Monica Galvan lives in Streamwood, and works 40 hours per week in a minimum wage healthcare job, while her husband works at a moving company. Despite both of their jobs, the couple struggles to feed their 13-year-old and 4-year-old sons.

“By the time we’re done paying our gas, electricity, and other utility bills, we just don’t have enough money for food,” Monica said.

The family receives fresh fruit, vegetables, canned goods, and protein at the Church of the Holy Spirit Food Pantry in nearby Schaumburg.

We absolutely rely on food pantries or else we would really struggle to eat, period,” Monica said.

The food pantry serves approximately 2,000 individuals per month, many of which have part-time and full-time jobs.



Dave Rauch receives food from a Greater Chicago Food Depository Mobile Pantry in Chicago Heights.

“I just want my family to have a good life. I want my kids to have a better life than I had,” said Dave Rauch, 54.

That’s why Dave was standing in line at a Greater Chicago Food Depository Mobile Pantry in Chicago Heights recently.

“I’ve got to be the supporter of my three kids and wife,” he said. “I’ve got to do anything I can to not sink. The food I get here helps my family stay afloat.”

Dave has two teenage daughters and a six year old son. One daughter wants to be an engineer. She is a sophomore in high school, and has already been contacted by recruiters from Harvard. Dave’s other daughter hopes to be a teacher after going to community college, and Dave’s son just started first grade.

The food Dave receives at the Mobile Pantry allows him to support his children’s dreams.

“Everything helps,” he said. “What I get here lets us hold back from going to the grocery store and lets us stretch the food we have even more.”

Dave turns to the food distribution for assistance because he was recently laid off from his union construction job, which he held for more than 30 years. Now, he is working full time as a welder in a factory. But he still has trouble making ends meet.

“It’s tough out there because there are so few jobs available,” he said. “But I’m doing what I can to make sure my kids have a bright future.”



Crystal Cochran receives more than \$500 in SNAP benefits per month, and gets fresh fruit, vegetables and canned goods from St. James Food Pantry.

As lawmakers prepare to debate the Farm Bill, which will likely include cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Crystal Cochran, 27, knows that any reduction in benefits would make it more difficult for her family to afford food.

“I receive just over \$500 in food stamps every month,” she said. “I try to make do, but cuts would be hard.”

Crystal used to work full-time in retail, but was laid off recently. She now has a home healthcare job which is only four hours a day. She struggles to feed her four and eight-year-old children, and receives assistance from the St. James Food Pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in the Bronzeville neighborhood.

“I run out of food stamps before the end of the month all the time, so this helps me bridge the gap,” she said.

She comes to the pantry twice a month. She receives fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat, which helps feed her growing children.

“I don’t know what I would do living without it. I just wouldn’t have enough food otherwise,” she said.

Crystal remains upbeat, despite potential cuts to SNAP, and the loss of her full-time job.

“I volunteer at my children’s school and at the food pantry,” she said. “Like the food I get here, that helps me live.”



Michael attended a Veterans Stand Down at the General Jones Armory last summer.

Michael White, 57, served in the military overseas for nine years and is now homeless.

He has been in and out of the hospital, and went to a Veterans Stand Down event on the South Side of Chicago to get a healthy meal, provided by the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Chicago's Community Kitchens program.

"Events like this make (veterans) feel appreciated," Michael says. "I'm hungry, but this meal makes it better."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are nearly 18,000 veterans in Cook County living below the poverty level. The Greater Chicago Food Depository is expanding its veterans outreach in order to meet the increased need.

In fiscal year 2013-2014, the Food Depository aims to provide hot meals to 800 Veterans and distribute 2,000 takeaway food bags at Stand Down events. Further, the Food Depository is partnering with the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center and AmeriCorps to open a choice-model food pantry for Veterans on Veterans Day.



Jose Lopez and his children head home after receiving fresh produce at the children's school.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, Jose Lopez was picking his children up from school in the Pilsen neighborhood. He was also picking up food for his family.

"Our fridge is literally empty right now. I don't know what we'd do without this," Jose said.

Jose was attending a Healthy Kids Market distribution, which is a market-style food distribution inside schools across Cook County. He was receiving fresh fruit and vegetables, including oranges, apples, pears, peppers, potatoes, and carrots. He was also receiving shelf-stable items at the distribution.

Jose is working two jobs, one in maintenance and one at a storage company. He has four school-aged children, which he and his wife are raising. Because of Jose's two jobs, the family does not qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, but they are still struggling.

"Trying to pay the bills, paying rent, utilities, all the maintenance and daily expenses, plus raising children, it's hard to get by," he said.

But, with help from Food Depository programs like the Healthy Kids Market, Jose is able to keep his children fed, and ensure their success in school.

"My children are all honor roll students, and it's in large part because of the food we get here," Jose said. "It keeps them going."



Teresa Hamilton poses with Chicago's Community Kitchens Director Paul Le Beau and Food Depository Executive Director and CEO Kate Maehr after receiving her diploma.

Teresa Hamilton struggled with unemployment for a long time. She wasn't the person she had always hoped she would be. She had been to jail, and didn't have much drive in life.

But that changed when she was accepted into the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Chicago's Community Kitchens program.

"The program completely changed my life," Teresa said. "It gave me my life back and made me a better person."

Chicago's Community Kitchens is a 14-week training program for underemployed and unemployed individuals. The program prepares students for a career in the foodservice industry.

For Teresa, the program was a wake-up call. Every day, she needed to get out of bed at 4:30 a.m. to make sure she got to the Food Depository on time.

"I learned, rather quickly, that we have to be accountable for our actions," she said. "We have to step up and take charge of our lives if we want to succeed."

That's exactly what Teresa did. She spent hours in the kitchen learning knife skills, how to bake, grill, and measure ingredients. She also learned proper food handling techniques. Outside of the kitchen, she overcame struggles with culinary math, and graduated from the program this fall. She was the class speaker, and is now employed at J&L Catering, one of Chicago's premier catering companies.

"The CCK staff often said, 'Today is the first day of your life,'" Teresa said. "Every day, we took a step towards graduation, and all those steps have added up to one huge accomplishment."



Kerryn Slawson, 50, has been receiving food at Moraine Valley Community Church for nearly a year.

Not long ago, Kerryn Slawson was making \$100,000 per year at a job in transportation.

"I was always the person that people came to for food," she said. "My friends, family, would say, 'I need some help, do you have anything to spare?' And I'd give them plenty."

About a year ago, Kerryn lost her job. And, she was recently given custody of her sister's seven and 11-year-old daughters, after their mother passed away. Now, Kerryn, 50, struggles to feed her own three sons, and her sister's children. So, she gets food assistance twice a month from the Moraine Valley Community Church food pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in Palos Hills.

"I never expected to be in this situation," Kerryn said. "But you've got to deal with it somehow. This food helps me do that."

She receives fresh produce, nonperishable items, and meat at the pantry.

"The pantry has been just awesome," she said. "I'd starve if it meant the kids could eat, but with the pantry I don't have to do that."

Kerryn is working assorted jobs while she looks for full-time employment.

"I need a full-time job really badly. Anything helps, but it's just that no one is hiring right now," she said.

On a recent Thursday, Kerryn was just one of nearly 30 people waiting in line outside the food pantry before it opened. In October, the pantry served nearly 600 people, a record for the 13-year-old agency.

"There are so many working poor," said pantry coordinator Beth Heinrich. "Some of the people we see have two or three jobs but still have trouble."



Anna Donegan visits the Union Avenue UMC food pantry in Canaryville.

On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Anna Donegan was not preparing a meal for the upcoming holiday. She was not baking cookies, or peeling potatoes, or roasting a turkey. Instead, she was waiting in line at a food pantry on Chicago's South Side.

Anna, 29, was recently laid off from her full-time waitressing job in the city. She used to receive \$450 per month in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, but recently her benefits dropped to \$300.

"\$150 per month less might not seem like a lot, but it adds up quickly," she said.

To support her family of four, especially during the holidays, Anna gets food from the Union Avenue UMC Church food pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in Canaryville.

"I don't have enough money or food stamps to afford much for Thanksgiving, so anything that I get today is going to go a long way towards making tomorrow better," she said.

At the pantry, Anna receives fresh produce, bread, meat, and canned goods. After she is done choosing her groceries, she bundles up, preparing to head out into a frigid November morning. She smiles.

"This food is just a huge help," she said. "It helps make Thanksgiving bright."

"I really just want my own place to live," he said. "That's what makes a difference. And this year, I think I can make that happen."



Maria Rodriguez receives food from the Alvernia Food Pantry in Elmwood Park.

Two years ago, Maria Rodriguez and her family ran into difficult times.

She and her husband had been working full-time and they were able to support their children. But, around the same time, the couple got sick and could no longer work.

“When that happened, it was really hard. It was rough,” she said.

Struggling to feed her family with just disability, Maria decided to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. While the family was accepted into the program, the benefits quickly dropped from \$92 per month, then to \$72, because of her two daughters’ incomes.

“They’re paying our rent right now because we can’t work,” Maria said. “They take care of rent and my husband and I pay the bills, but everything is expensive, so it’s difficult.”

Because of a slight increase in income, the family’s SNAP benefits recently dropped to zero. That’s when Maria started coming to the Alvernia Food Pantry in Elmwood Park.

“I come to the pantry now because the kids need to be fed,” Maria said.

The pantry, one of the Greater Chicago Food Depository’s member agencies, serves nearly 100 families per month. On her most recent visit to the pantry, Maria received large boxes of shelf-stable items, plus two bags full of frozen meat.

“This stuff is what keeps us going,” she said. “It’s been a great help.”



Araceli Escobedo with two of her daughters, Karina and Giselle, at the Gunsaulus Scholastic Academy Healthy Kids Market.

For Araceli Escobedo, the Healthy Kids Market at Gunsaulus Scholastic Academy in the Archer Heights neighborhood isn't only convenient, it's a huge help.

Healthy Kids Markets are market-style food distributions in schools in high-need areas across Chicago. The program is a collaboration between the Food Depository and Chicago Public Schools. Any family with children at the school is eligible to receive food.

At Gunsaulus, fresh fruit and vegetables, plus shelf-stable items, are distributed every Thursday. Four of Araceli's children go to the school, so when she picks them up on Thursdays, she is able to get food she otherwise might not be able to afford.

"It's a really big help," she said. "In the wintertime, vegetables just get so expensive in the stores. It's just difficult to afford that right now."

Araceli and her husband own a home near the school. Her husband works full-time as a mechanic, but she recently lost her job. The couple is struggling to support their children, and the Healthy Kids Market makes that easier.

"My kids love fruit and vegetables, so I try to make sure I'm at the distribution every Thursday," Araceli said.

For many individuals in Cook County struggling with food insecurity, the winter months can be even more difficult, as utility bills increase. That's the case for Araceli, who has just started to see a spike in costs.

"It's pretty tough," she said. "Between the mortgage, and the bills, it's hard. So when I have to buy food, I have to shop the sales. That's why this food is really important."

The Healthy Kids Market at Gunsaulus has only been operating since September, but word of the program has already spread. The distribution is averaging nearly 200 individuals per week.



Marguerite Jacobs lives in the Altgeld Gardens neighborhood and receives food from a Mobile Pantry distribution near her home.

Christmas was only days away, and Marguerite Jacobs feared she wouldn't have anything to put on the table for her four children.

Unemployed, Marguerite has been looking for a job for months with no luck. She struggles to get by, and tries to make ends meet with the \$400 she gets per month in SNAP benefits. But, it's nearly the end of the month, and her benefits were almost gone.

"I don't get the new SNAP benefits until the seventh of each month," she said. "What can I do? What am I going to do in the meantime to feed my family?"

Marguerite lives on the far South Side of Chicago in Altgeld Gardens; a community isolated on three sides by a wastewater treatment facility, the Little Calumet River, and the Bishop Ford Freeway. Because of its location, nearby food is expensive, and getting to full grocery stores can be difficult.

"A lot of people who live here don't have a way to the store at all," Marguerite said. "Taking two or three buses and then trying to carry groceries back just doesn't work."

On Thursday, Marguerite found out she would not need to worry about her holiday meals. A Greater Chicago Food Depository Mobile Pantry at Altgeld Gardens distributed fresh fruit, vegetables, shelf-stable items, and turkeys.

"This is an absolute blessing," Marguerite said. "With prices going up, turkeys around here cost at least \$65. I just can't afford that."

Now, Marguerite will have a meal to serve her family on Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

"I'll cut it in half, cook one half for Christmas and then save the other half for the following week," she said. It's just an incredible gift."

Orlando Collins does not have a wish list this Christmas. He doesn't want any electronics, or movies, or books. He doesn't need the latest fashion, or the newest toy.

He just wants a warm place to sleep, a roof over his head, and a hot meal.

Orlando is living at the Franciscan House of Mary and Joseph Shelter in Chicago's Garfield Park neighborhood. He's been there since July 2012, when he lost his job at a car wash, and the building he was living in got foreclosed on.



Orlando has been living at the Franciscan House of Mary and Joseph Shelter since July 2012.

"It was the first time I had been out on the street," Orlando said. "I had nowhere to go. I knew I had to go to a shelter. I was making about \$500 per week at the car wash, but without that it wasn't possible to pay rent. When it rains, it pours I guess."

At the Franciscan House, which is a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency, Orlando receives hot meals twice a day. The food is prepared with ingredients received from the Food Depository's Food Rescue program, which delivers perishable items that are near their sell-by dates that grocery stores would have discarded.

The shelter has been getting Food Rescue food for about four months. Previously, residents ate soup and a sandwich every meal.

"To know that you can come and get a warm bed, and a hot meal, it really puts a smile on your face," Orlando said. "It makes you feel good after you've been outside all day."

Since he started staying at the shelter, Orlando has begun to get back on his feet. He got his food safety certification, and now has a job as a dishwasher. He's beginning to save some money, he got help applying for SNAP and he also volunteers occasionally in the shelter's kitchen.

While Orlando doesn't want presents for Christmas, he does have one wish.

"I really just want my own place to live," he said. "That's what makes a difference. And this year, I think I can make that happen."



Colleen Chavez and her husband are getting back on their feet.

Seven years ago, Colleen Chavez's life took a turn she never expected: she lost her job. Colleen used to work in a warehouse 36 hours per week, putting together boxes. She and her husband were making good money to support their four children. Soon after Colleen was laid off in 2007, her husband also lost his job as a carpenter. Without any income, and for the first time in their lives unsure of their future, the couple needed to turn to food assistance to feed their family.

They found the Union Avenue Food Pantry in Canaryville soon after.

"The pantry has literally been a lifesaver," Colleen said. "I get stuff there that goes a really long way, like chicken, beans, rice, eggs — all the necessities."

Since she was laid off, Colleen has been unable to find a new job. But, her husband had more success — he was just hired in a machine shop. He's now working six days a week, waking up early and staying late to help the family.

"We're trying to get back on our feet right now," Colleen said. "We're just making it with our gas and electric bills, but it's pretty tight."

Colleen volunteers at Union Avenue once or twice a month, but she dedicates most of her days to job searching. In fact, she is usually up by 2:30 a.m. to start the search online, before getting her children off to school.

"Don't ask me how I do it. I just have to. It's a must. I need a job desperately right now to help support my family," she said. "But the pantry gives us that little extra that lets us keep our heads up."



At a recent trip to Elijah's Pantry, John received apples, potatoes, onions, plus meat, cereal and canned items.

John Palos lives on \$1,075 per month.

That's how much the 54-year-old from Logan Square receives from disability. Take out \$600 for rent, and John has less than \$500 to spend on groceries and other necessities for the month. John can't afford to pay his gas bill, so to make ends meet, he asked the utility company to shut it off.

"I can only afford the electric bill," he said. "I need money for food."

John heats his basement apartment with an electric heater because he can't afford to pay for the gas furnace. He receives fresh fruit, vegetables, and a large bag of nonperishable items once a month at Elijah's Pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository agency near his home.

"I wouldn't be able to afford fruit and vegetables without this," John said. "This makes my budget possible, especially in the winter."

Before going on disability, John managed a restaurant. He's beginning to look for a new job, but while he does, he'll wait out the winter, knowing food is available when he needs it at Elijah's Pantry.

"Bottom line, this helps me make it on a monthly basis, and I don't know where I'd be without it. Probably cold, and hungry."



Anthony Robinson visits St. Sylvester food pantry in Logan Square to get the food he needs when his SNAP benefits run out.

Anthony Robinson knows two sides of hunger.

Formerly a full-time social services case aide for drug and alcohol abuse clients, he connected people with the services and food assistance they needed. Anthony was a lifeline for those with nowhere else to turn.

In August, Anthony lost his job. Now, he needs a lifeline.

"I used to help people every single day," he said. "Now I need the help."

He applied for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and receives \$189 every month. While SNAP is a big help, Anthony still has trouble affording all the food he needs.

"At the end of the day, SNAP just really isn't enough to live on," he said.

Anthony found his lifeline in the form of the St. Sylvester Catholic Church food pantry in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood. On a recent Wednesday, Anthony received a bag of food at the pantry, including fresh fruit and vegetables, frozen meat, and nonperishable items.

"This will last me a couple weeks," he said. "Which is great, because right now I don't have enough money to go to the supermarket."

Anthony isn't trying to use the pantry often, only when he absolutely needs it. In the meantime, he's searching for a job, and he's been in this position before.

"Twenty years ago, I was homeless for a while. I lost my job and got a divorce around the same time, and I was out on the street," he said. "But, I turned it all around. I got into social service, and I'll turn it around this time too."



Lavinia Woolridge receives fresh fruit and vegetables from the Producemobile distribution in Evanston.

Lavinia Woolridge leaned against a wall inside the Robert Crown Center in Evanston, surrounded by nearly 200 people. Some laughed and chatted. Children scampered across the floor. A woman walked past Lavinia with a babbling baby in her arms. But, Lavinia wasn't hearing any of it. She was concentrating. Finally, she looked up and smiled.

"29 years," she said. "That's how long I was a nurse."

Lavinia, 60, might still be working if she hadn't hurt her back and needed two surgeries to repair it. But because of that injury, she was on disability. She was struggling to afford food, which is why she was at the Robert Crown Center, waiting for the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Producemobile distribution to begin.

"This helps a lot because I'm on a fixed income and I'm very limited in what I can buy at the store," Lavinia said.

She's been coming to the Producemobile for nearly a year.

On that day, she was receiving oranges, apples, mangos, broccoli, potatoes, bread and more. As a nurse, she knows how important nutritious food is to good health.

"With this, I supplement what I can't afford otherwise," Lavinia said. "I love salad, but I can't afford to buy all the ingredients, which is why it helps to get some here."

The need is high in Evanston. Lavinia arrived 45 minutes before the distribution began, hoping to be at the front of the line. She received ticket number 157.

"The way the economy is now, people don't have jobs," she said. "This kind of thing comes in handy. Everything helps, and by the grace of God, I'm still going."



Once a month, Luisa and Marie come to the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Producemobile distribution in Chicago Heights.

Luisa and Marie are best friends. They live on the same street in Chicago Heights and their children go to the same school. They have a lot in common – including the fact that they are both struggling to afford food.

“The money I have left over each month is so little for food,” said Marie, who is looking for a job, while her husband works 60 hours per week as a steel worker to support their 14-year-old daughter and two sons.

Meanwhile, Luisa's situation is similar. She is trying to find work so that she can support her two children, after being laid off from a job in a supermarket.

“Before I eat, I make sure that my kids eat, because sometimes we don't have enough for everyone,” said Luisa. “And if I don't get anything, I'll wait for the next day. That's just how it works out.”

On the fourth Thursday of every month, Marie picks up Luisa and they go to the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Producemobile distribution at the Chicago Heights Park District building.

“Spinach, kale, tomatoes, most produce is too expensive for me to afford at the store,” said Marie. “I just have to walk right by it. Which is why it's helpful to get healthy food at the Producemobile.”

For Luisa, receiving fresh produce at the distribution is critical, especially in the winter.

“My food budget becomes minimal when I'm paying for utilities. Sometimes I'll pay only half of my utility bill just to afford food,” she said.

Ultimately, the Producemobile not only fills a need for food in Luisa and Marie's lives, it also reminds them that friendship can help weather any situation.

“This is a humbling experience, no question,” Marie said. “But it's better when we can come together.”



Robert Lewis, right, chooses bread at Operation Blessing in Alsip.

Five years ago, Robert Lewis' life changed in an instant. Driving one afternoon, a car ran a red light and slammed into the side of his vehicle at 70 miles per hour.

"I got T-boned," he said. "There was nothing I could have done."

In critical condition, he was rushed to the emergency room. The crash had severely injured his back and left him paralyzed. He would spend a year and a half in the hospital, recovering and learning to walk again.

After Robert was discharged, he could no longer work as a security guard, as he had before the accident. Despite his wife working full-time, medical bills began piling up and his family was struggling to make ends meet.

But, the Operation Blessing food pantry in Alsip, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency, has helped his family get back on their feet.

"It helps a lot," he said. "I get \$380 per month in SNAP for my family of five, but that's not enough to last us all month. This is a good supplement to what I buy at the store."

While Robert's life was sidetracked by his accident, he has begun to rebuild. He can now afford his medical bills, because of the food he's receiving at the pantry. And, he recently stopped using his cane to get around.

"While I was in the hospital, I had one goal: if I could get up and walk to the window in my room, I knew I was ready to leave," Robert said. "You have to have the willpower to accomplish what you want, and eventually I did. And that's how I'm living my life."



Linda Garcia has been receiving food from the St. Francis Xavier Church food pantry since she lost her job in sales.

On a bitterly cold Tuesday morning in La Grange, Linda Garcia was waiting in line at the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church's food pantry 30 minutes before the doors opened. She pulled her coat closer and put her hands in her pockets.

"I'm severely diabetic, so when I don't have enough food, I get really sick," she said. "This pantry is literally keeping me alive."

Linda, 63, has been coming to St. Francis Xavier for nearly two years, since she lost her job in sales and soon after got sick. She receives \$720 per month in Social Security, but most of that is used for rent and utilities. With an extremely tight budget, she needs help affording the essentials that her diet requires.

"When you're diabetic, you have to eat healthy," she said. "But I can't afford fruit, vegetables or meat at the grocery store, so it's difficult."

At the SFX Food Pantry, Linda receives the nutritious food she needs to stay healthy and manage her diabetes – strawberries, bananas, potatoes, carrots, chicken and more.

"The pantry makes sure that I have enough to eat," she said. "This place and the Food Depository are saving people's lives. You're really helping."



Before he retired, Mike Berilla was a retail store manager and auditor. His Social Security isn't enough to support his family so he goes to a Food Depository pantry in South Chicago Heights.

Mike Berilla is retired. But for him, retirement doesn't come with the financial security that many would hope for.

He and his wife are struggling to get by on his \$1,000 per month in Social Security, and her income working as a part-time tax clerk.

"I'm supposed to get my Social Security check this week," he said. "That'll help a lot, because right now I have about \$5 left for food."

Before Mike retired, he worked as a retail store manager and an insurance auditor. But, his savings haven't been enough to get by every month. He wants to go back to work to help take the burden off his wife but has been unable to find a job.

"It's been rough, especially with the increased utility costs this winter," he said. "That's why I've been coming to Alicia's House pantry for the last few months."

At the pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in South Chicago Heights, Mike receives bags of shelf-stable items, as well as meat and fresh fruit and vegetables.

"It's tough to make ends meet for my family, but you just have to live within your means," Mike said. "This pantry helps me do that."



Eileen Poeppel has been volunteering at Irving Park Community Food Pantry for eight years.

Every Wednesday morning, 66-year-old Eileen Poeppel catches a bus at 5:15 a.m. to reach the Irving Park Community Food Pantry by 6 a.m., three hours before the pantry opens. She's there to receive food, but she's also there to help out.

For the past eight years, Eileen has been managing the small kitchen at the food pantry. She serves snacks and warm coffee to clients waiting to receive their food.

"It's nice to help a place that is helping me," she said.

Eileen first came to the pantry nearly 10 years ago. She was on disability and had been let go from a job in customer service. Now, she is receiving social security, which helps pay for medical expenses related to her diabetes, but she still doesn't have enough left over to pay for the groceries she needs. So, she turns to the food pantry for essentials.

"I get most of my vegetables at the food pantry," Eileen said. "It's so expensive otherwise."

In addition to produce, Eileen receives meat and shelf-stable items from the pantry, which is especially important since she is also taking care of her son-in-law and his three children, while he recovers from surgery.

Eileen's age and diabetes make it difficult to get around and her tight budget makes paying for public transportation difficult. But, she is committed to a cause that helped her.

"Doing my part here is completely worth it," she said.



Ulondia Johnson tells her story to Rep. Robin Kelly's staff as Food Depository executive director and CEO Kate Maehr looks on.

Ulondia Johnson has struggled with hunger practically her entire life. Living in the Altgeld Gardens neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, she has had trouble finding jobs and making enough to support her three children.

"I would come home crying because we didn't have enough to eat," she said.

She knew she had to break her cycle of poverty, so she enrolled in a six month certificate program at a local college that trained her to teach art. She's now working at the Golden Gate Day Care Center, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency near Altgeld Gardens.

"You just have to have the right mindset and good things will come to you," she said.

But, Ulondia wasn't content just defeating her own hunger. She wanted to make a difference for her neighbors in need. She applied, and was accepted for, a scholarship to join the Food Depository at the National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference this past week in Washington, D.C.

"I have known hunger in my life and so have my children," she said. "I want to tell lawmakers that story."

And she did. On Tuesday, Food Depository advocates visited with 11 lawmakers on Capitol Hill. In a meeting with Rep. Robin Kelly's staff, Ulondia told her story, while holding back tears.

"I have experienced hunger," she said. "It's hard when you don't have enough to eat."

After the meeting, Ulondia received plenty of hugs from the other advocates. As she walked away from Rep. Kelly's office, she knew she had made a difference.

"My voice was heard today," she said.



Dorothy Oviedo lives in La Grange and receives food assistance from the St. Francis Xavier Food Pantry.

Dorothy Oviedo has been coming to the St. Francis Xavier food pantry in La Grange for nearly 10 years, since her husband left, leaving her to take care of their two children. She works part-time in childcare and owns her home.

She had always hoped her savings would be enough to help her make ends meet when she got older, but now she isn't sure - her mortgage and monthly payments are quickly depleting her emergency funds.

"The pantry really helps stretch my food stamp dollars," she said.

Dorothy receives \$189 per month in SNAP benefits. But she still can't afford produce, so she gets it at the food pantry.

"I get all kinds of fresh vegetables at the pantry," she said. "I wouldn't be able to afford them otherwise."

In addition to fresh fruit and vegetables, Dorothy receives meat, bread and shelf-stable food at the pantry.

"It's hugely beneficial to me," she said.



David Suarez, a proud U.S. Army Veteran, shares his story at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center.

Many people affectionately know David Suarez as “The Picasso of the South Side.”

David, a 72-year-old Army Veteran proud of his service, built a shrine to the Armed Forces in the front yard of his Canaryville home. He was a general contractor and built his own home, enjoying success in his field.

But in 2006, he was diagnosed with cancer and the treatment quickly began to drain his savings.

“I didn’t want to go to a pantry at first because of pride. Foolish pride,” he said.

But David, now a three-time cancer survivor, and his wife Barbara, both unable to work, found assistance at the Union Avenue UMC church food pantry near their home.

“I realized how helpful the people there were and how important the food was to my family,” David said. “Being cared for like that is amazing.”

At Union Avenue, David receives staple items needed to maintain a healthy diet.

“Because of that pantry and the Food Depository, I’ve had the nutrition support that I’ve needed. That’s one of the reasons I’ve been fighting my cancer,” he said.



Renee Phillips visits the Alvernia Food Pantry in Elmwood Park once a month.

Renee Phillips needed a change.

In May, she moved from Florida to Illinois, after being released from prison. She wanted to start over and found a job as a waitress, but was laid off soon after. Renee turned to the Alvernia Food Pantry in Elmwood Park.

“I was homeless for awhile, but Alvernia has been amazing. I would be starving if it weren’t for this place,” she said.

Renee received counseling through St. Celestine Church, which manages the pantry. Her future is looking brighter. She found an apartment and is now working full-time in retail.

While she’s slowly building up savings, she still needs the pantry for the essentials.

“I get bread, meat, eggs and vegetables here,” she said. “That’s what keeps me eating.”



Paul Latture used to have a successful career at a commercial bakery, but was laid off in 2011.

Cakes, pies, donuts, cinnamon rolls. You name it and Paul Latture would make it at his job in a commercial bakery. And he loved it.

"I mostly worked on making donuts, but when the mood struck, the other bakers and I would experiment and make things for ourselves," he smiled, recalling one specific concoction. "Once, we put some butter, cinnamon and apple slices on dough and made a pastry. It was delicious."

Paul, 64, was laid off in 2011 after working at the bakery for seven years. Now, he can only afford to live in a kitchen-less studio apartment, so he no longer bakes. He hasn't been able to find a job, so he applied for early retirement.

"I've probably filled out 15,000 applications, but nothing," he said. "I was planning on working well into my 70's."

He struggles to live on his retirement check - only \$604 per month - and \$189 per month in SNAP benefits. But once a week, Paul receives a bag of fruit, vegetables, meat and nonperishable food from EZRA Multi-Service Center, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in Uptown.

"The cost of food, everything, is so high," he said. "Without EZRA, it would be very, very hard to make it."

In addition to the bags of food, Paul participates in a monthly cooking program at EZRA, giving him the opportunity to bake again. He also works the Link machine at a nearby farmer's market, which enables SNAP recipients to purchase produce from the market.

"I really just want to try to help if I can," he said.

It's evident that Ruben Garcia and Guy Fones have been best friends for a long time. They joke around; sometimes even finish each others' sentences. They went to high school together on the Northwest Side of the city about 30 years ago.

"Guy and I, we're like brothers," said Ruben.

On a recent Tuesday, they visited a Greater Chicago Food Depository Producemobile distribution in Evanston. Both were receiving food assistance for the first time.

"This will help my family a lot," Ruben said. "I'm already seeing things we can cook and use all week."



Ruben Garcia (left) and Guy Fones (right) recently received fresh produce for the first time at a Producemobile distribution in Evanston.

Ruben worked in loss prevention for 20 years, but was laid off when the Recession started in 2008. His wife works full time and the family is trying to make ends meet to take care of their two young children.

He finally decided to seek assistance because the family has very little left.

"Basically right now we're just going with the essentials," Ruben said. "We have to adjust and live with what we have."

Ruben found out about the Producemobile at his daughter's school and called Guy to suggest he come too.

"I never thought I'd be in this position," Guy said. "I'll use all of this. I need it."

Guy was an information technology consultant until being laid off in March 2012. Now receiving SNAP benefits of \$120 per month, Guy works part-time in cleaning and sales.

"With the vegetables I'll get here, I can make a big pot of soup and it will last me about a week," Guy said.

He came to the Producemobile because his SNAP benefits for the month have already run out. He will not have any money for groceries until his Link card is refilled next month.

While Guy's situation is difficult, he chooses to maintain a positive attitude.

"I'm two months behind on my car payment and my bank account is in the negative," he said. "But I'm not giving up."

Ruben shares that outlook.

"The glass is half empty or it's half full," Ruben said. "I choose to see it half full."



Linda Harper, right, picks out food at the St. Vincent de Paul Center food pantry. She's assisted by Outreach Program Manager Jenny Mohan, left.

To the kids in the St. Vincent de Paul Center's childhood development program, Linda Harper is simply known as, "Grandma."

"I help them grow, teach them not to be mean and to get along," she said, smiling. "It's rewarding."

Linda, 65, volunteers at the center about 20 hours per week. She started back in 2011, when her life took an unexpected turn.

"I was working for the CTA, driving trains, but then I had a stroke," she said.

Soon after, she had another stroke and had to go on disability. She knew she needed help affording food, so she applied for SNAP benefits, but they weren't enough. That's when she started coming to the St. Vincent de Paul Center's food pantry.

"It helps me out with things I don't have enough money to get at the grocery store," she said. "I like the canned fruit. They also give me produce, bread, ground beef and more. It helps me last the month."

It has been a long recovery from her two strokes, but Linda has overcome the obstacles.

"At first, I could barely walk and speak. My right hand would shake and I had a stutter," she said. "But now, I'm back at 100 percent."

As for her role as "Grandma," she's just happy to help the children.

"I think sometimes they get confused, calling me Grandma at school and then having a grandma at home too," she laughed. "But that's okay. I'm just happy to be here."



James Sewell, 47, is a U.S. Army Veteran, who receives food from the Chosen Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church food pantry in Bronzeville.

James Sewell's mother is in a wheelchair and on oxygen. His son is in college and his niece is about to graduate high school. Living in the same household, he tries to support them, but he's struggling.

"I've got a full-time job, but I don't make nearly enough to support my family," he said.

James works in maintenance, and is a certified welder. He has a degree. He served in the Army from 1986 to 1993. After his service, he worked in construction, retail and other jobs.

Despite the consistent employment, he never made enough to save much. So, about a year ago, he started turning to the Chosen Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church food pantry, a Greater Chicago Food Depository agency in the Grand Boulevard neighborhood, to help make ends meet.

"I started coming to the pantry out of necessity," James said.

At the pantry, James receives necessities — fresh produce, canned food and meat — that help him feed his mother, son and niece.

"This carries us from one month to the next," he said. "It's tough out there, but this pantry is such a blessing."



Phillip Best plays the piano during meals at Breaking Bread Ministries on the Near North Side.

Smooth, confident chords poured from a piano in the dining room at Breaking Bread Ministries on a recent Wednesday. At the keys was Phillip Best, who receives a hot meal from the Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency on the Near North Side once a week.

“I was in really bad shape when I first came here,” he said. “I had fallen on hard times and I was on the verge of being on the streets.”

Phillip, 59, began coming to Breaking Bread in August of 2012, after he lost his job at a hotel. He had worked in hospitality for five years.

“I know I can count on a good, healthy meal here every Wednesday. It helps,” he said.

Without a job, Phillip fell four months behind on his rent. But, staff at Breaking Bread helped connect him with a temporary work agency, and soon after, he was hired full-time by a legal support company.

“With the job, I was able to pay off my rent and my phone bill,” Phillip said. “I’m still working on a few things but I’m doing better.”

Phillip still comes to the meal on Wednesday nights, as he slowly gets back on his feet. He helps set tables and clean up when there aren’t enough volunteers. And when he’s not helping out, you can usually find him sitting at the piano, playing Stevie Wonder.

“I grew up with a piano in my house and have been playing since I was young. I love music. The piano, this place, it’s a good release for me,” he said.



Lisa Gant was recently laid off from a job in logistics. She now receives food from a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency in Melrose Park.

Just last year, Lisa Gant was making \$60,000 per year at her job in logistics. But, she got laid off and since then, she's run into health problems and is in the middle of a divorce.

"I'm pretty much at the end of my savings right now," she said. "And I'm at the end of my rope."

Her unemployment benefits recently ran out. She does receive \$189 per month in SNAP benefits, but has no other money to afford food.

"SNAP just doesn't cut it," she said. "Food is expensive."

About a month ago, Lisa found the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Parish food pantry, in Melrose Park. There, she receives fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, pasta, tuna and other nonperishable items once a month.

"It helps me make ends meet," she said.

Despite her recent challenges, Lisa knows the best way to cope with adversity is to have a positive attitude.

"Just because you're down right now doesn't mean you're always down. I know things will get better."



Heidi, from Maywood, struggles to afford food for her 9-year-old daughter.

In order for her 9-year-old daughter to have a healthy life, Heidi is more than willing to make sacrifices in her own life.

One of those sacrifices is food.

"I've lost fifty pounds in the past few months skipping meals so my daughter can eat," she said. "We don't have a lot as it is, but what little we do have I give to her when there's not enough for both of us."

Heidi is on disability and receives \$152 per month in SNAP benefits. She's unable to work more than 25 hours per week, so finding a job to support the family has been difficult.

"I'm able to pay for a roof over my head and can barely make my utility payments, but I don't have anything left over for food," she said.

In order to make sure both her daughter and herself are fed, Heidi visits the Canaan AME Church food pantry in Maywood once a week.

"When you don't get that much in SNAP, anything helps," Heidi said.

At the pantry, Heidi receives meat, produce and nonperishable food.

"It enables me to feed both my daughter and myself," she said.

52 Stories, 52 Weeks: From homeless to feeding others



A warm smile, a safe haven and a hearty meal. Isaac Barentine and Will Pruitt know the importance of all three for someone who's homeless.

"Having a good meal means you've got one less thing to worry about that day. It gives you stability and a sense of hope," said Will.

Isaac and Will operate a lunch program six days a week at the Preston Bradley Center in the Uptown neighborhood. Every day, they're working to feed those in need. But it wasn't always that way. Not long ago, they were both homeless.



Isaac, left, and Will operate the Preston Bradley Center's lunch program in Uptown.

"I came to Chicago from Detroit after being laid off," said Isaac. "I got into some things and made some bad decisions and was homeless for close to six years."

But Isaac decided he wanted to clean his life up and eventually got a job driving trucks. In 2002, he took over the lunch program full-time.

"There are good people here," he said. "There are people that need just a tiny bit of sunlight in their lives for them to make something of themselves. This helps them do that."

Will met Isaac in 2008, when Will was homeless and came to the program looking for a warm meal.

"I was raised to thank the person who made my meal," Will said. "So one day, after I ate here, I went up to Isaac and said, 'Thank you. Is there anything I can do to help before I leave?' And Isaac asked if I was serious. I said yes, and he told me that they were short-staffed that day and needed help cleaning dishes in the kitchen. We've been working together ever since."

Will is now the program's volunteer coordinator and he and Isaac have become best friends.

"He's not just my boss, he's my big brother. We've been through a lot together," he said.

Because of Isaac and Will's hard work, the meal program served more than 28,000 meals last year, prepared from 56,000 pounds of food from the Food Depository.

"There's a real need for this program in this community," Isaac said. "This might be the only meal our guests get all day. So we have to make it the best meal possible."



Brian Perez receives food from a pantry in Melrose Park, which helps him take care of his new family.

Brian Perez is 21 years old. He is married with a young son and daughter. As a new father, he wants nothing more than to provide for his family. But he is struggling.

“We’re going through a tough time right now,” he said. “It’s really hard.”

Brian had a job in roofing, but was laid off. He’s now working at a temp agency, jumping between retail and warehouse work, to try to make ends meet. The problem is, some weeks he works nearly 40 hours, but others he works less than five. And, he’s been unsuccessful at finding a full-time job.

“No one is hiring for steady jobs right now. I can’t get anything,” he said.

Most of Brian’s paycheck is used to pay rent. He’s living in a studio apartment with his wife and two children.

“We still owe half of this month’s rent,” he said.

Brian has practically nothing left over every month to buy food for his family, which is why he started going to a Greater Chicago Food Depository food pantry in Melrose Park once a month. There, he receives produce, meat, bread and nonperishable food.

Between the food he gets at the pantry and the \$200 per month he receives in SNAP benefits, Brian can focus on finding a full-time job, and doesn’t have to worry about feeding his family.

“As long as my family is eating, I’m okay. And I know things will work out,” he said.



Norberta Almazan Bahena received bags of fresh produce from a Producemobile in Logan Square, which helps her maintain a healthy lifestyle as a diabetic.

Norberta Almazan Bahena is on the cusp of two milestones: she's turning 73 in a few weeks, and 2014 marks her 40th year living in the United States. For her, picking up two large bags of food during her first visit to the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Producemobile distribution at the McCormick Tribune Y in Logan Square serves as an early – and important – birthday present.

Having migrated from Mexico City to Chicago to better her economic situation, Norberta admits her plan didn't work out as expected.

"I didn't make as much of a fortune, but I'm content. With little money – and illness – but I make do," she said.

Norberta worked a number of jobs over the course of her career, her responsibilities ranging from sewing and washing clothes to serving food in restaurants to working with manufacturing equipment. She was laid off from her last job and hasn't had a steady income since 2001.

Since then, making ends meet has been a challenge.

"There will be days when there's very little in my refrigerator," Norberta said. "A small piece of bread, a couple pieces of fruit, a little bit of milk."

Now, thanks to the Producemobile, Norberta's fridge is full of fresh fruits and vegetables such as beets, cabbage, corn and melons.

As a diabetic, Norberta finds maintaining a healthy diet especially difficult.

"You have to pay a premium for healthy food," she said. "But this food – it makes one come to life."

Despite the obstacles she has faced trying to stay nourished on a limited budget, Norberta stays positive, explaining that the best antidote to adversity is willpower.

"You have to fight ... to maintain a good life balance," she said.

Bob Anderson, a resident of Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood, goes by the nickname Ziggy. It helps him stand out, he says.

"There are a million Bobs out there – but not a ton of Ziggys."

And stand out he does.

At 80 years old, Ziggy is physically fit, his stride almost as quick as his wit. When Kathy Morris, director of Food Depository member agency St. Ignatius Church Food Pantry, asked Ziggy what he likes in his coffee, he replied, "Everything in it except your pointer finger."



Bob "Ziggy" Anderson takes a 10-minute walk to the St. Ignatius Church Food Pantry each time he visits. The items he receives from the pantry – as well as the exercise he gets on the way there – help keep him healthy.

Ziggy and Kathy met 18 months ago through a mutual friend who told a struggling Ziggy about the food pantry. Since then, the pantry director and client have become friends themselves.

A cook by trade, Ziggy left his job at Evanston Hospital in 2006, leaving him with little money to fall back on during the recession. He has attempted to re-enter the workforce, though he admits that the prospects are slim.

Meanwhile, Ziggy receives Social Security benefits as well as \$16 per month in SNAP benefits. He also lives with two roommates to save on rent. Still, these sources of income aren't enough to make ends meet.

"I never thought I'd go to a pantry," he said.

Ziggy has benefited from St. Ignatius for a year and a half: "longer than I thought I would."

Still, as a former cook, he's happy with the food he receives.

"I like what I take," Ziggy said.

Ziggy usually gets an assortment of fresh produce, canned items, cereal, chicken and eggs. On top of the food, Ziggy enjoys the pantry's friendly atmosphere.

"The people here are nice," he said.

The aid Ziggy gets at St. Ignatius helps him maintain the spring in his step in more ways than one.

"It meant some relief," he said. "My savings, they're depleted. This food helps me both financially and naturally."

On top of being a much-needed source of food, each trip to St. Ignatius Church is a pleasant stroll that keeps the 80-year-old's blood pumping.

"I walk down here with a cart. It's a 10-minute walk," he said. "I don't want anyone helping me carry this."

At 1 p.m. on Tuesdays, dozens of people gather at Grant Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood to enjoy a hot meal. Many arrive early to socialize, play piano and sing along with their fellow neighbors. Once everyone's seated, however, it becomes clear that food is the focal point.

"It's good food," said Derrick Lucas, enjoying a plate of roasted chicken, macaroni and cheese and beans. "And they're good people."

In addition to hot meals, Derrick has benefited from the bags of food Grant Memorial AME, a Greater Chicago Food Depository member agency, distributes through its food pantry.



Whether homeless, employed or retired, Derrick can count on Grant Memorial AME's soup kitchen and food pantry for a consistent source of quality food.

"There aren't too many churches that both feed you and give you a big bag of food," Derrick said.

Since Derrick lives on his own, these bags of food will last him roughly two weeks.

Derrick has gone to the Grant Memorial AME soup kitchen and food pantry off and on for the past 10 years. Like many of the individuals eating with him, Derrick learned about these programs through word-of-mouth.

"I found out about this place a long time ago, and that's when I really needed it," he said. "I was homeless, I wasn't working ... This place kept me from being hungry a lot of days."

Even as Derrick transitioned into a job in manual labor, Grant Memorial AME remained a necessary food source.

"Manual labor – it's hard," he said. "Any time you can have a nutritious meal ... that helps. You can't work on an empty stomach."

Unfortunately, pre-existing knee and back conditions took a toll on Derrick's body despite his healthy diet, making manual labor a less feasible option. Now retired and receiving disability benefits, Derrick begins a new chapter in his life – and Grant Memorial AME, just as it has in the past 10 years, provides consistent aid amidst change.

"You can't really go hungry around here," Derrick said. "They're (the volunteer staff) like a second family."

And it's this neighborhood feel – piano music playing in the background and the universal need for quality food bringing people together – that keeps Derrick coming back week after week, year after year.

"I come here not only because I have to – but because I want to," he said.

52 Stories, 52 Weeks: Overcoming life's challenges



Life is full of challenges, bumps in the road. Some are larger than others, but what's most important is how they're overcome.

On a sunny, muggy day at Smith Park in Chicago Heights, 3-year-old Roberto and 7-year-old Guadalupe Alcala's most pressing challenge was accidentally getting whacked in the face with a soccer ball.

While Guadalupe nursed her lip and Roberto rubbed his eye, the children's mother silently faced overcoming a larger challenge: hunger.



From left to right, Valeria, Guadalupe and Roberto received summer meals at a Lunch Bus stop in Chicago Heights.

"It's really hard to make ends meet," Maria said. "Food is starting to get really expensive. Two lemons cost \$1. That's too much."

Maria is working part-time at a laundromat, while her husband works full-time in a lumber yard. Their monthly budget leaves little room for food.

"With my husband's salary, it takes us two checks to pay our rent, and then we can use whatever is left for water, electric, phone bills," she said.

While the family does receive SNAP benefits, their food budget becomes especially tight during the summer, since the children no longer eat breakfast and lunch at school.

That's why Maria, Roberto, Guadalupe and 6-year-old Valeria were at Smith Park. They were waiting for the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Lunch Bus.

"The Lunch Bus provides my kids a place to play, and they get to eat lunch," Maria said. "It provides a little bit of help."

When the bus arrived, nearly 100 ecstatic children lined up to receive meals at the park.

"My favorite part of today's lunch was the cheese," Guadalupe said, a rope of string cheese hanging from both sides of her mouth.

"Mine was the muffin," Valeria chipped in.

The Lunch Bus makes 21 stops on three different routes across Cook County every weekday during the summer, distributing meals with a sandwich, fruit and vegetables.

"This program doesn't benefit just my kids. Everyone else's kids benefit from this," Maria said.

For Maria, the Lunch Bus provides the food her children need to stay healthy and active during the summer. It's one way she's overcoming hunger.

As for Roberto and Guadalupe, it didn't take long to overcome their playground bumps. The redness quickly faded and the tears were wiped away. After finishing lunch, they picked themselves up and headed back into the park, arm-in-arm, carefree and ready to tackle another summer day.