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# **During coronavirus crisis, revamped Swampscott food pantry anchors seniors, families**

By William J. Dowd

A group of civic-minded locals planned on rolling out their newest philanthropic endeavor – The Anchor Food Pantry – on Swampscott Town Meeting floor in mid-May.

They hoped for a summertime opening, bringing months of convened meetings and planning into fruition. But the coronavirus pandemic arrived in mid-March, derailing the pomp and circumstance organized around the food pantry’s debut.

“It forced us into action right away,” said Diane O’Brien, the food pantry’s treasurer. “We started reaching out to our neighbors and friends for donations.”

**‘A greater need’**

The Anchor Food Pantry succeeds a former one that began roughly two decades ago, when Swampscott’s six religious congregations founded a rotating interfaith food pantry.

“Since approximately 2000, the interfaith has been providing residents with monthly food donations,” said Gina Bush, the Swampscott Senior Center’s outreach coordinator. “Each church was responsible for providing families with food for two months of the year.”

In the fall, St. John the Evangelist’s Pat Krippendorf – the interfaith program’s lead organizer – approached Bush about possibly taking over the food pantry.

Bush pulled O’Brien and Selectman Laura Spathanas into the conversation.

“After several meetings, it was decided that a greater need in Swampscott existed than the [then interfaith] pantry could meet,” said Bush, who serves as the food pantry’s clerk.

Today, The Anchor Food Pantry is a nonprofit with federal 501(c)3 status. Over the fall and winter, the four women recruited five more people just as passionate about food accessibility and security to sit on The Anchor Food Pantry Board of Directors.

Spathanas is the nonprofit’s inaugural president. She has played a leading role in the annual Stamp Out Hunger food drives.

“This is a passion of mine,” said Spathanas.

The food pantry’s reconstitution expanded its mission and reach; in due course, they will also serve Nahant residents.

In a relatively short time, “The Anchor Food Pantry” has become a familiar name in Swampscott households. In mid-March, the nonprofit jumped in to help fill a community need as the town hunkered down in response to the coronavirus crisis.

In Swampscott right now residents live under a stay-at-home order. Most restaurants and businesses remain shuttered, some only offering deliveries and take-out food. Some heads of households cannot work while social-distancing continues. Vulnerable populations need food, so the food pantry is helping fill that void.

**How to help**

Folks can drop off or mail monetary and nonperishable food to Spathanas’ Swampscott home: 43 Berkshire St. For donation information, conduct a Facebook search of “Anchor Food Pantry.”

Spathanas said she finds boxes and food left on her doorstep and in the mailbox, and she even received boxes of food that donors bought off Amazon and shipped directly to her home. Some people donated over Venmo and PayPal.

The overwhelming communal response to their cause proves “this town shows up,” said O’Brien.

“You tell them what you need, and they just step up and make it happen,” she added.

Spathanas agreed.

“It no surprise to me,” she said. “They want to share, contribute and feel connected.”

While a logistical framework is in place, Anchor Food Pantry remains homeless.

“We are still looking for a permanent location,” said Bush. The old, vacant Swampscott Police Station has been floating around as a possible home.

For now, with the senior center closed, the team moved in and set up shop there. With monetary donations, they buy bulk groceries at Market Basket and Costco, and a small group sorts bought items and packages them in paper bags.

pathanas said they’ve handed over 140 bags of groceries, brimming with granola bars, oatmeal, fruit cups, apples, canned meat, Oreos, microwavable popcorn, canned vegetables, toilet paper among other necessities and wares.

Swampscott residents (with proof of residency) can pick up a bag at Swampscott High School, 200 Essex St., on Mondays and Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Seniors can call: (781) 596-8866, and arrange a delivery.

Keep the donations coming, said Bush.

“We realize the need for the food pantry is likely going to increase,” she said.

A sad reality in the coronavirus era is, Spathanas pointed out: “There are families who never thought they’d be in a situation like this.”