

Open Pantry Community Services offers Senior Food Choice emergency pantry program for Springfield residents age 60 and older



Allison Maynard and Candace Larger, of Open Pantry Community Services in Springfield, are shown here in the emergency food pantry which offers a Senior Choices program for city residents age 60 and older.



By **Kathryn Roy** | **Special to The Republican**

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SPRINGFIELD - As many recipients of federal **SNAP**, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, benefit, see cuts to their aid, **Open Pantry Community Services** continues to do its best to provide needy area residents with food to help them make ends meet.

The Senior Food Choice program allows senior citizens to come to the agency's emergency food pantry more often, and have a say in what they receive in their

allotment of food. Senior Food Choice is a program offered on the third Monday of every month.

“That’s typically when people are running short on resources, especially if you’re living on a fixed income,” said Candice Larger, director of the pantry. “If you’re receiving SNAP benefits, that’s when people are really feeling the pinch.”

The pantry closes its doors to the general public on that day, and opens only for senior citizens age 60 and older. “What makes the day unique is that it’s a day when people can choose their food,” said Allison Maynard, **Open Pantry** director.

Normally, the pantry finds out a family’s size, and the family is given a box of pre-selected food. But with Senior Food Choice, participants can choose what they receive.

“People can choose from grains, fruits and vegetables,” Maynard said. “When we have the money, we purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. People are paired up with a personal shopper, and they get to actually walk up and down the aisles and choose their food.”

While the process is more labor-intensive, Maynard said it reduces waste because participants aren’t stuck with food they don’t like and aren’t going to eat. Participants still must choose the designated amounts of certain food groups, as recommended for a balanced diet by the federal government. The amount received is considered a week’s worth of groceries.

The pantry serves upwards of 150 people on these days, making the program very successful, Maynard said.

“(Seniors) tend to be more resistant to coming into the pantry and asking for help, so it’s been a great way to get seniors to come in and not feel like we’re just handing them a box of groceries,” Maynard said. “People love it. This is just like grocery shopping.”

Participants are known to start lining up for the program an hour ahead of time, to make sure they are able to choose what they want.

Along with their selected foods, the pantry offers recipes so they can learn new ways to prepare their vegetables and other foods.

“We try to encourage healthy eating habits as well,” Maynard said.

Because Senior Food Choice happens once a month, participants can come up to 12 times a year. Other patrons are limited to six visits a year; that's up from three visits a year previously allowed for the general population, Larger said.

“Our numbers kept climbing, and we would add a visit,” she said. “People would run out of visits and ask for more, so ultimately, we ended up with six visits, which frankly is still inadequate.”

About 11 percent of people served by the pantry are senior citizens, and about 50 percent are families. The Open Pantry saw 39,000 service visits in fiscal 2013, up from 32,000 the year before.

“I think it’s a combination of unemployment running out, the economy not being all that great and the reality that people are just in need of food to supplement their income,” Maynard said.

Larger said the agency continuously seeks out grants to help pay for fruits and vegetables for the program.

In addition to the food pantry, the agency offers financial literacy classes, nutrition classes and SNAP benefit sign-ups.

The food pantry is located at 2460 Main S. For more information, call (413) 737-5353.