

VALLEY STREAM

ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY

New pantry opens to offer 'support and help' to those in the community who need it

BY TIFFANY CUSAAC-SMITH

tiffany.cusaac-smith@newsday.com

There is a new establishment sitting on a Valley Stream corner that's unlike most stores in the area.

While its shelves are stocked with in-demand items, the purpose of this place is to give people in need access to food without charge.

The West Nassau Center for Food Assistance & Community Support, a food pantry that opened Tuesday, hopes to give people dealing with food insecurity the nourishment they need in the face of financial and other pressures that can make buying food elsewhere difficult.

"Even if you're having financial issues, problems in your household, you can come here for support and help," said Assemb. Michaelle Solages, (D-Elmont), who played an instrumental role in opening the food pantry. "You're not going to be judged; you're going to be loved."

Food insecurity rising in U.S.

The food pantry is the ninth location for Long Island Cares — The Harry Chapin Regional Food Bank and is among a number in the region providing provisions in the face of a growing number of U.S. households facing food insecurity.

Across the United States, 13.5% of households — or 18 million — faced food insecurity in 2023, the highest portion since 2014, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said in a report released this month.

In homes that have people under the age of 18, roughly 18% of households — or 6.5 million — faced food insecurity in 2023, according to the USDA's report based on a representative portion of America's population.

The report did not detail reasons for the prevalence of food insecurity. But Eric Mitchell, president of the Alliance to End Hunger, a Washington, D.C.-based national coalition of more than 100 organizations, said the factors are multifaceted, including inflation and reductions of gov-



The new food pantry in Valley Stream is the ninth such location operated by Long Island Cares — The Harry Chapin Regional Food Bank.

SERVING THE NEEDY

■ **A new food pantry has opened in Valley Stream,** operated by Long Island Cares — The Harry Chapin Regional Food Bank.

■ **The pantry is one of several** designed to address growing food insecurity in the region.

■ **Its origins go back to the pandemic,** when a nearby Valley Stream church offered emergency food to those in need, and 30 to 40 families showed up on most days.

ernment programs such as the expansion of the child tax credit, which has ended.

Mitchell believes food banks are one way of dealing with food insecurity. But he said it also includes ensuring that domestic nutrition programs in-

clude expanding access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and pushing for greater access to more nutritious food.

"We have to have a holistic approach to addressing food insecurity," he said. "We often say you're not going to food bank your way out of hunger. And so, it does take strong policy."

'Excited about food again'

The origins of the Valley Stream food pantry date back to the pandemic. Amid concerns about food insecurity, Solages and others approached Long Island Cares about giving away food at Valley Stream Presbyterian Church in 2022.

On most open days, the church saw 30 to 40 families arriving at the emergency food center, officials said.

When the food distribution eventually closed, Solages asked Long Island Cares for a

permanent replacement, which would become the food pantry. To do this, Solages secured a legislative grant of \$200,000. Rep. Gregory Meeks also secured a congressional earmark in the amount of \$360,000.

Obstacles to opening the site included getting zoning and variance issues resolved and overcoming concerns about lines outside, Long Island Cares staff said.

Now that the food pantry is open, the staff said they hope it will service the community with dignity and cultural awareness.

"We want people to get excited about food again," said Jessica Rosati, Long Island Cares' vice president for programs and community services. "It stinks to have to have the heavy [pressure] of, how am I going to feed myself today? How am I going to feed my kids tonight?"

The Valley Stream site is

open Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Tuesdays are only open to active military members and veterans. Some of the food items are geared to serve a large Caribbean population in the area.

Long Island Cares staff said they hope the location is also a place where community partners can also counsel people on matters like health insurance or rental assistance.

A soft launch of the site that happened between Aug. 19 and Aug. 31 saw more than 40 families come in, staff said. And officials hope the pantry will grow from there.

"This is an established location that's going to have regular hours that not only provides the food [but] . . . also provides, you know, guidance and support for people. So, I really think this is a great opportunity for people to get the support that they need," Solages said.