

Bethpage Hospital Joins Efforts To Reduce LI Hunger



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St. Joseph's, the Catholic Health hospital at 4295 Hempstead Turnpike in Bethpage, has embarked on a mission to help feed food-insecure residents throughout the community. They have teamed up with Long Island Cares for their new "bags-to-go" program, which has seen massive success since its initial launch last year.

Dr. Jessica Rosati, program Vice President, described how these two organizations came together. "In 2022, the Long Island Cares CEO and administrative staff met with Dr. O'Shaughnessy to discuss ways in which the regional food bank can work more closely with Catholic health to address the social determinants of health such as food insecurity and poverty." Dr. O'Shaughnessy is the president and CEO of Catholic Health. "There was a tremendous amount of synergy between our two organizations," Rosati noted. Both organizations are equally eager to find solutions for struggling Long Islanders; this was a pairing that felt very promising.

"We have existing partnerships with other allied health partners surrounding mobile distribution," Rosati said. "The ability to work with Catholic Health in this capacity was seamless. Catholic Health is one of the leading health care providers that focus on serving the whole person, especially nutrition. The staff at Catholic Health are wonderful and super easy to work with."

From this meeting, the "bags-to-go" program was piloted. The initiative includes all 6 Catholic Health Hospitals operating on Long Island; St. Charles Hospital of Port Jefferson, St. Francis Hospital of Roslyn, St. Catherine of Sienna Hospital in Smithtown, Mercy Hospital in Rockville Centre, Good Samaritan Hospital in West Islip, and of course St. Joseph's Hospital of Bethpage. To-go bags are prepackaged, nonperishable, and nutritious; each contains at minimum at least 5 fruits and vegetables, 2 whole grains, and 3 dairy and protein items. More items are included as often as possible, pending product availability. Each bag contains a minimum of 3 days (9 meals) for a family of 1-2.

According to Dr. Larry Eisenstein, Vice President of Community and Public Health at Catholic Health, the program is part of a



Food-to-go bags prepared by Long Island Cares. (Photo courtesy of Peter Crescenti, Media Relations Specialist LI Cares)

bigger plan to provide for "well care" rather than "sick care". He explained, "People think hospitals want their beds filled up. No, we want to help people stay out of the hospital." Preventive health methods must improve and expand, and the food-to-go bags are one method of this undertaking. Currently, an aim of St. Joseph's, and other Catholic Health hospitals, is to decrease and prevent unnecessary admissions. "Anything we can do to address the needs people outside of the hospital, outside of clinical care, is what we're trying to do."

Hunger is a common cause for patients to be admitted into urgent hospital care. "People come in weak or dizzy and don't want to admit they haven't eaten in days," commented Dr. Eisenstein. When patients are brought into the emergency room at St. Joseph's, they are screened for hunger vital signs; a brief questionnaire process - developed, says Dr. Eisenstein, by the CDC - which helps to determine if hunger is a likely contributor to a patient's admission.

If they are deemed food insecure, they are provided with an immediate to-go bag of food. Long Island Cares equips each of the hospital ER's with emergency bags and replenishes them as they are depleted. "People come into the hospital hungry - no one should leave the hospital hungry," said Dr. Eisenstein. "Thankfully the majority of our patients are not food insecure, but we don't want there to be a stigma, we don't want people to be embarrassed or ashamed." Patients were also referred to Long Island Cares if they had ongoing food-insecurity issues.

In the months following its launch, the "bags-to-go" program has distributed over 900 meals at St. Joseph's and the other five Catholic Health hospitals. Now the program has taken another giant leap forward. Bags of food are now being distributed at Catholic Health ambulatory care, walk-in clinics, home-care operations and cancer institute locations. Rosati noted, "The program is growing, and Catholic Health has

been a great partner in securing additional funding to sustain and grow this program. We are also working to implement additional programs to aid our Senior and Homeless initiatives."

Recently, the program received a major boost from the Harris Beach law firm in Uniondale. The firm donated \$5,000, which will help pay for an additional 2,700 meals, according to LI Cares' Media Relations Specialist Peter Crescenti. Such a generous donation has been greatly appreciated by the staff working on this hunger program. "We were elated to have Harris Beach donate," said Rosati. The funds will go to the purchase of food to be distributed on the to-go bags and help stave off hunger for many Long Island families.

Dr. Eisenstein has been thrilled by the program's progress; its ability to unclog some of the pressure on hospital staff, as well as the mission of the program itself. "Staff are happy that this is one less thing they have to worry about. Plus, you're feeding hungry people, how can that not feel good?" The social work element of this program is vital in closing the loop, and has demonstrated the value of cross collaboration in fighting the hunger crisis.

About Catholic Health - St. Joseph's:

St. Joseph Hospital, part of the Catholic Health system, is a community hospital located in Bethpage, NY. Our compassionate doctors, nurses and healthcare staff are committed to providing excellence in care to meet the health needs of our patients. At St. Joseph Hospital, we pride ourselves on delivering safe and skilled care that patients and their loved ones can trust.

About Long Island Cares:

Long Island Cares has been on a mission to feed Long Island's food insecure and stamp out the root causes of hunger since their founding by the late Harry Chapin in 1980. To help achieve their goals, they are guided by seven principles: Leadership, Innovation, Collaboration, Accountability, Respect, Empowerment, and Stewardship. They provide nutritional food and support services for a network of more than 374 community-based member agencies, including food pantries, soup kitchens, emergency shelters, childcare programs, disability organizations, veterans' services programs and more. The work is not done, and Long Island Cares is committed to serving Long Island as long as the need is great. Visit www.licares.org/ for more information on their facilities or to learn how to get involved today!

- Additional information provided by the St. Joseph's and the Long Island Cares websites