

LONG ISLAND

LI Cares to open new food pantry in Valley Stream, as demand grows



The Harry Chapin Humanitarian Center food pantry in Huntington Station on June 28, 2021. Credit: Jeff Bachner

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One of Long Island's largest food banks is set to open a new satellite location in early spring to meet the growing demand of hungry Long Islanders as prices go up and new immigrants arrive, officials said.

The nearly 3,000-square-foot storefront on Rockaway Avenue in Valley Stream has been under construction for the past three weeks, said Paule Pachter, CEO of Long Island Cares, the Harry Chapin Food Bank. He said he hopes once it opens in March or April, the site can serve between 800 to 1,000 people per week.

That would match the demand of five other food pantries and a pet pantry for food and pet supplies in Lindenhurst. Other pantries deliver food in Lindenhurst, Freeport, Bethpage, Huntington Station and Hampton Bays.

Pachter said he saw the demand for food in Valley Stream while doing food pop-ups at the Valley Stream Presbyterian Church during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding for the site came from a \$200,000 grant secured by Assemb. Michaelle Solages (D-Elmont) and \$360,000 in congressional funding requested by Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-Queens).

"We're very anxious to open. We have a lot to offer to the community in the spring," Pachter said. "We know the population and we're getting lots of calls asking when we're going to open."

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The site has been in the works for more than a year while Long Island Cares secured building permits, Pachter said. Once open, the food pantry plans to distribute a wide variety of food to match the area's diverse culture including residents from the Caribbean, West Indies and Latin America.

During the past year, the organization's requests for food assistance have increased between 35% and 50% — and as high 70% in some areas, according to Pachter. While in recent years, the food bank would serve about 230,000 hungry Long Islanders, that number has now grown to more than 300,000, including about 65,000 children, Pachter said.

"We anticipated that following the active years of COVID, where we were seeing upward of 70% increases, that the numbers would begin to go down. But that's not what's happening," Pachter said Friday.

"We really thought that as we began to come out of it, and people went back to work, maybe people found new jobs, those numbers would change ... But for us, we're still in pandemic mode. And that's really very disturbing."

In an average year, Long Island Cares could see 60,000 to 70,000 individuals in their satellite locations, he said. By the end of September, that number had already exceeded 137,000. And for the first time, their six locations have already distributed well over one million meals.

Randi Shubin Dresner, president and chief executive of Island Harvest, painted an equally dire picture.

The Melville-based food bank is on pace to distribute close to 17 million pounds of food this year, about a million more than in 2022.

And just this holiday season, the requests for turkeys alone is up 34%, she said.

Shubin Dresner said that after the pandemic ended, many Long Islanders were left with unpaid bills and medical issues that had been put on hold, just as the costs of everything from food to gasoline was peaking.

"We went through a pandemic where many people lost their jobs or their jobs were put on hold," she said. "And all that time, their bills were mounting. We got out of the intensity of the pandemic and people were just getting back to work ... And that's when we were hit with this inflation."

Pachter points to two key factors driving the increase in food insecurity: a 30% to 35% increase in the cost of many groceries — sending many families to pantries in search of essentials such as milk, eggs, butter, chicken and turkey — and an increase in new immigrants arriving, whether legally or illegally, on Long Island.

"We see many, many families in our Freeport satellite that are multigenerational from South America, Central America, where you have the mom, dad and the kids bringing in the grandparents; maybe an uncle or an aunt or cousin to live with them until they can get successfully situated with a job that pays well hopefully and until they can find their own apartment," he said. "They're really putting a strain on the pantries because it's many people that we have to feed."

Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman, who hosted a news conference Wednesday in Mineola on food insecurity, encouraged residents to do their part by donating nonperishable items that are being collected at all county buildings through Christmas.

"Be generous if you can afford it," Blakeman said. "Give some food and make somebody's holiday season that much better."