

Teaming up to feed LI

Corporate enlistees, hospitals partnering with charities to help

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

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There's a well-honed system in place at Island Harvest food bank's Melville warehouse for the volunteers to follow when packing boxes with food.

One morning last week, a 19-member volunteer team from one Long Island bank loaded boxes with nonperishable food items — shelf-stable milk, soup, cereal, juice, canned beans, pasta, canned fruit, peanut butter, raisins and more. Each box they filled had to weigh 31.5 pounds. If it didn't, it went back to quality control because that would mean something was missing. The boxes moved along a conveyor belt, then were weighed and loaded onto a forklift and shrink-wrapped. Eventually, thousands are packed and delivered by Island Harvest to senior citizens across Long Island.

Volunteers are helping the food bank package 4,000 food boxes a month, said Randi Shubin Dresner, president and chief executive of Island Harvest. Dresner and officials at Long Island Cares, the Island's other major food bank, said such partnerships — not only with corporate volunteers who give time and money but also with several local hospitals — enable them to have a greater reach to help Long Island's food-insecure population, which by one 2022 estimate was 230,000 people.

"Packing 4,000 boxes is a lot," Dresner said. "We have a small staff . . . We can't do this project without volunteers."

Among the Bank of America volunteers helping out last week was Giovanna Salamone of Massapequa, a financial center manager vice president at the Wantagh office. She's been volunteering with Island Harvest for about 10 years and was moved to do so, she said, out of a sense of wanting to help the Long Island community.

"This is one that definitely speaks to every community be-



A team of volunteers from Bank of America helps pack food into boxes at the Island Harvest Food Bank warehouse in Melville on Tuesday.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Long Island food banks** say partnerships with corporations and hospitals are key to increasing their reach on Long Island.
- **Corporate volunteers** help pack boxes and contribute time and money to the cause, the food banks say.
- **Hospitals and clinics** partner with food pantries to give food to those who need it and to provide nutrition counseling.

cause food insecurity happens everywhere, whether it be schools, whether it be seniors," she said.

A colleague, Eric Klein, 36, of Huntington, an operations analyst for Bank of America's Eastern Suffolk market, said that as a child of a single, disabled mother growing up on Long Island who was helped by various social service programs, he was compelled to pitch in, too.

"I enjoy doing this," Klein said. "It's important that, since

I have the capacity now, I can give back. My mother does receive food every month from Island Harvest. She is partially disabled, so it really helps her."

Work with hospitals, clinics

The food pantries also are partnering with hospitals and clinics to provide food to those who need it and provide nutrition counseling. The health care officials partnering with the food banks draw a clear link between nutritious food and health. In some cases, hospitals are growing their own produce or forming partnerships with established farms to serve their patients better food and to give to communities in need.

"It's impossible to have good health without good nutrition," said Dr. Patrick O'Shaughnessy, president and chief executive of Catholic Health. "Overall, you're 40% more likely to develop a chronic condition if you're food insecure."

He said the hospital system, which has six hospitals on Long Island, wanted to make an impact "by helping people stay healthier, maybe prevent or delay

chronic disease" by working with Long Island Cares "to help get food out to people who need it."

Long Island Cares partnered with Catholic Health last year in providing "grab-and-go" bags of food to patients in the hospital system's emergency rooms, said Jessica Rosati, the food bank's vice president for programs.

"We equipped all [six] of their hospitals on Long Island . . . with emergency food bags," she said.

"We were already doing mobile distributions at health care clinics in Nassau and Suffolk," Rosati added. "In talking with Catholic Health and understanding what they were seeing among their patients, it connected."

Northwell Health's efforts are similar.

Dresner said the food bank started working with Northwell "five to seven years ago . . . Those screening positive [for food insecurity] could be referred to an Island Harvest dietitian . . . As patients were leaving, we would give them a package of healthy food. Our dietitians could help patients un-

derstand relationships between the food they were eating, their chronic health conditions and the medicines they're taking."

Nutrition, health connection

Dr. Debbie Salas-Lopez, Northwell Health's senior vice president of community and population health, said, "It's important to recognize that food insecurity and nutritional insecurity is a social determinant of health . . . It's said that 80% of an individual's health and well-being can be attributed to some of the factors," and "food insecurity is one of them."

It's something state and federal regulators are acknowledging, officials said, with New York seeking federal approval to require hospitals next year to screen patients for food insecurity.

"We completely believe that this is the right approach, not to wait for people to come in sick or not having enough food, but actually collaborate and partner with the community," Salas-Lopez said.

Northwell has screened

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"close to 1 million people, since 2017, for unmet social needs, otherwise known as social-related needs," Salas-Lopez said, including food insecurity. "Imagine if you have diabetes or [high] blood pressure or another chronic condition. If you're not able to buy healthy food, you're not able to control your diabetes or your blood pressure."

Northwell has responded with its "Food as Health" program, Salas-Lopez said. "We've been providing food, referring people [to food pantries], enrolling people in SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program]." The hospital system partners with both food banks to provide "grab-and-go" meals to food insecure patients and nutrition counseling.

The health system also partners with Queens County Farm, which is four miles from Long Island Jewish Medical Center.

Stony Brook University Hospital is "working toward becoming a partner agency with Island Harvest or Long Island Cares," said Nicole Rossol, chief patient experience officer at the hospital and co-chair of its health equity committee. In the meantime, she said

the hospital screens patients for food insecurity and refers those who are to its social work team "to make a full assessment" of the patient's needs and make referrals.

Stony Brook Hospital also has its own farm on its roof, called Stony Brook Heights Rooftop Farm. "We harvest 1,500 pounds of produce each year," Rossol said. "The majority of our produce will go to our hospital food service to supplement patient meals."

The hospital's homegrown produce also goes to the university's student food pantry and to food-insecure patients.

Dresner said collaborations with local companies and health care institutions are crucial to help "vulnerable populations."

During the first six months of this year, Dresner said, Island Harvest has worked with more than 170 Long Island companies.

"Without partnerships, there's just so far an organization like Island Harvest can go in the community," she said. "When we have partnerships with hospitals and corporate partnerships, it allows us to leverage resources of both organizations to best serve communities across Long Island."



Stars have a ball, all for charity

Actors Lori Singer and Steve Guttenberg are all smiles at the 75th East Hampton Artists & Writers Charity Softball Game at Herrick Park on Saturday. The game benefits several charities on the East End.