

An Inside Look at the JCCRP

Food Pantry Organizers Esther Shenker and Yocheved Monczyk



With today's rising costs, making ends meet can be more than a little challenging, particularly when it comes to grocery shopping as the price of staples continues to head north. It comes as no surprise that particularly after the devastating effects of Hurricane Sandy, the food pantry at the Jewish Community Council of the Rockaway Peninsula is seeing more clients than ever before.

"We normally put together 350 packages per month," said Esther Shenker, who as director of the Jewish Services Coalition, also runs the food pantry in conjunction with the JCCRP. "Since Sandy, we are up to over 400 packages monthly."

The food pantry carries both fresh fruits and vegetables and staples including dry good, canned goods, rice, beans, dried and shelf stable milk, and occasionally chicken and fish.

"We try to stock items with a longer shelf life," explained Esther. "Since the hurricane we also have diapers, wipes, formula, cleaning supplies and school supplies."

The Far Rockaway resident is the mother of three daughters and one son and a proud grandmother to boot. Originally employed as a social worker, Esther joined the JSC when her youngest child was three and a half and since that time she has worked on many different projects within the agency.

According to Esther, the food pantry began in 1986 at the request of then-Assemblywoman Audrey Pheffer, in response to a request from the National Council of Jewish Women who wanted to fund the project.

"We began with just 75 families," recalled Esther. "Now we register almost that many new families every month."

Most clients receive packages on a monthly basis but in cases of extreme need, food is provided more frequently. Esther is hoping to raise more funds to have a larger client choice pantry instead of the current standard food package being offered. While some of the food in the pantry is donated by synagogues and individuals, Esther reports that much comes from city, state and federal funding and in recent months after this past fall's mega-storm, from the Red Cross.

"So many people in this area are still not in their homes and experiencing very difficult financial situations right now," said Esther. "FEMA hasn't stepped up to the plate and the insurance agencies really haven't come through either. It can be

a full time job going after both those agencies and people are really hurting a lot."

"We owe a lot of gratitude to William Rapfogel, CEO of the Met Council and Benny Wechsler, director of the Met Council's food pantry network for providing us with a large portion of our goods," added JCCRP Executive Director Nathan Krasnovsky. "They have been instrumental in supplying us with extra items during and after Sandy."

Given the many services offered under one roof at the JCCRP, a beneficiary agency of the UJA and an affiliate of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, Esther says she often steers people to take advantage of all that is available at the facility.

"Food is just a band-aid," explained Esther. "While they are here, we ask them if they were affected by the hurricane and if they were, we suggest they talk to one of our social workers. There are food stamps available. Medical insurance. We try to use the pantry as a way of getting a foot in the door and to introduce people to all the other services we offer."

Esther is assisted in her work by another Far Rockaway resident, Yocheved Monczyk. Born and bred in Far Rockaway, Yocheved is a mother of six who finds her work at the food pantry very rewarding.

"When people come in with a problem we do our utmost to work it out for them," said Yocheved. "When they walk out our door, it is a good feeling knowing that we were able to help them."

Esther credits her entire staff for their devotion to the many people who come to the food pantry.

"The people who work here are so dedicated," explained Esther. "They don't leave their job when they go home, they take it home with them. We try to treat everyone with a lot of respect because it isn't in the Jewish mentality to be on a line or to receive *tzedaka*. We all want to be givers, not takers. When people come here, we do our best to make sure that no one feels as if they are a charity case. We are here to help the community and I only wish that more people would come in and take advantage of the services that we are offering."

To contact the JCCRP, call 718-327-7755 or visit them at 1525 Central Avenue in Far Rockaway or online at www.jccrp.org.

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