

'Client Choice' plan helps food pantry help others

By **PAUL SASSONE**
Contributor

More dignity and respect for the client, less waste for the food pantry.

That's how Kathy Russell, executive director of the Oak Park-River Forest Food Pantry, characterizes Client Choice.

Client Choice is a procedure that allows food pantry clients to select their groceries, much as they would do at a grocery store, instead of just receiving a bag of groceries.

Clients have been receiving a standard bag of groceries of non-perishable food and been able to select meat, dairy and fresh produce. Under Client Choice, clients will choose all their food, perishable and nonperishable.

"Not everybody wants everything," Russell said. "We used to find some items discarded in the parking lot."

But Client Choice is the direction in which food pantries are going.

Client Choice benefits clients by allowing them the freedom and pleasure of choice, and even to try foods new to them. Food may also go further. Some families will not choose some foods, leaving them for others who do want them.

And costs may go down, Russell said, "If people don't select an item we'll know not to buy it."

To begin Client Choice requires staff and volunteers to be trained in how to work with clients as they choose food. More

Pantry starts a new chapter

Dressed in green shirts, they were there Saturday morning to help those in need.

In the center was Kathy Russell, executive director of the Oak Park-River Forest Food Pantry. And with one snip of a scissors, she inaugurated a new chapter in the pantry's history.

"I want to thank our volunteers and guests for helping us celebrate this day," Russell said. "I just read that 44 million people live under the poverty line. We've known of the problem and have been acting on it for the last 30 years. Today we start a new chapter. Client Choice debuts today."

open shelving also is needed so clients can see what choices are available.

The changes at the pantry are made possible by an award from AT&T, a grant from Kraft Feeding Possibilities Program via the Greater Chicago Food Depository and from gifts honoring the memory of Beth Drews.

The Oak Park-River Forest Food Pantry launched Client Choice in October, at its location in the basement of the First United Church of Oak Park, 848 Lake St., Oak Park. The food pantry serves 28 zip codes, including Oak Park, River Forest, Maywood, Broadview, Westch-

Client Choice is a new way of distributing food to clients that lets them select their groceries, as if they were shopping at a grocery store.

At 9 a.m. clients file in to register. Old, young, in-between. Short, tall, medium. All different. All the same in that they need food. Citizens of Hungry America.

Amid cheers from the volunteers, and a smile from its first client, the food pantry's new program is open for business.

Guests at the ribbon cutting included Oak Park Village Trustee Jan Pate and State Rep. LaShawn Ford, D-8th.

— Paul Sassone

ester, Melrose Park, Northlake, Hillside, Berkeley, Stone Park, River Grove, Elmwood Park and others.

The pantry serves approximately 1,200 clients a month. That's a 30 percent increase from last year, on top of a 390 percent increase from 2005 to 2009.

Approximately 10,000 to 15,000 pounds of food are delivered each week to the pantry by the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Trader Joe's and Ultra Foods donate produce to the pantry twice a week.

Originally, the pantry was a part of the Community of Con-

gregations.

But, the pantry has grown so much, Russell said, "We separated from the Community of Congregations in January. We are now our own tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation with our own board of directors."

The pantry has more than 300 volunteers.

"The community supports us wonderfully," Russell said. Fundraising for 2009 rose 51 percent from 2008 to \$268,340. In recognition, the pantry received the 2009 Best Fiscal Management Award from the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

Russell said the pantry is grateful for all donations, but that checks are particularly helpful. "We pay \$5.41 for a bag of groceries that would cost \$63 at the store." Checks should be made payable to the Oak Park-River Forest Food Pantry, 848 Lake St., Oak Park, IL 60301.

"Each person can make a difference," Russell said. "If you help someone with food, that person can redirect what money they have to housing, or medicine, or clothes. You may be helping someone to stay in their home."

More than 400 Girl Scouts will be doing that Oct. 9 when they hold their annual food drive for the pantry.

For more information about the food drive and the Oak Park-River Forest Food Pantry in general, go to www.oprfffoodpantry.org.

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