

A new approach

Cutting-Edge Food Pantry Planned In Hartford's North End

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FOODSHARE, CHRYSALIS CENTER AND THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF HARTFORD have teamed up to build Freshplace, a food pantry that, when it opens, will supply food to eligible residents of Hartford's Upper Albany neighborhood. Maryellen Shuckerow, Chrysalis Center's director of development and community relations, stands behind the entrance to Freshplace. (STEPHEN DUNN / HARTFORD COURANT / December 16, 2008)

When Ellen Kolsie-Wright can't find fresh produce at her neighborhood market in Hartford, she's out of luck.

Kolsie-Wright, who is disabled and doesn't own a car, has to settle for what's available.

But a year from now, she and her neighbors in the Upper Albany neighborhood may have another option. Foodshare, Chrysalis Center and the Junior League of Hartford have teamed up to build Freshplace, a 2,000-square-foot pantry that will offer eligible residents free, fresh food.

This super-pantry is thought to be the first of its kind in the country, according to Alicia Flynn, Foodshare's director of community engagement. It also will offer a host of services meant to pull families out of crisis, including assistance for people who don't know whether they qualify for food stamps.

The pantry is expected to open in 2010 at 255 Homestead Ave., which also will become Chrysalis' new headquarters. Commercial freezers and coolers will allow the facility to stock mostly fresh food, something most of the ubiquitous corner stores and 75 area pantries don't do.

Jerry Jones, executive director of Hartford Food System, which seeks to improve nutrition in Hartford, said Freshplace will fill a "critical gap" in Hartford, which only has one supermarket and is one of the nation's poorest cities.

The new pantry, Jones said, will help alleviate a common problem in Hartford, where many small pantries — some of them in church basements and closets — cannot store perishable food. Freshplace, he said, will not only fight hunger, but also provide more nutritious food.

"It's what every community food pantry should aspire to become," he said.

At least 145 pantries across the state allow visitors to choose their groceries — a practice Freshplace will copy — but they don't offer the web of services planned for the new pantry, Flynn said.

Chrysalis Center employees will work with their clients to identify and help eliminate factors that cause food insecurity. Junior League volunteers will help clients navigate the aisles of Freshplace. Foodshare will provide the food.

Clients, who will have to meet income limits, also will learn about nutrition, health care and child-care programs, among other things.

"We want this to be something that can be replicated elsewhere," said Carolyn Hoffman, a Junior League board member. "It's not enough to hand people a bag of food and walk away, because you haven't solved the bigger problem."

A local university will study the pantry's effectiveness. Maryellen Shuckerow, director of development and community relations for Chrysalis Center, said the group is negotiating with two universities, but she declined to identify them.

Unlike other pantries, which are open as infrequently as twice a month, Freshplace will be open at various times throughout the week, making it more accessible for working families, Flynn said.

The pantry also will provide a "more respectful" environment by allowing visitors to choose their own groceries, Flynn said. The practice better serves families who have dietary restrictions because of medical problems or cultural and religious differences.

"Why not choose the foods that their kids are going to eat?" she asked.

Chrysalis Center bought the Homestead Avenue property — a blighted building and former milk dairy — in 2002 for \$100,000. The group has raised most of the \$6.3 million construction cost — for the pantry and renovations to Chrysalis' new home — and needs to raise about \$850,000 more, Shuckerow said. Chrysalis plans to pay for the pantry's annual \$200,000 operating costs with grant money.

The Junior League, which issued the original request for proposals that launched the project, has pledged to work with Foodshare and Chrysalis Center for at least three years.

"We think that each of our organizations brings a different strength to the project, but together, we believe the project will be greater than the sum of the parts," Hoffman said.

Kolsie-Wright, who is retired, said she's looking forward to the pantry's opening. The pantry, she said, is long overdue.

"I'm more than sure it's going to be useful to a lot of people in the community," Kolsie-Wright said. "I'm very sure they're going to utilize that very well."