

# Paving the Way for Food Distribution



In 2023, the Winslow Community Cupboard (WCC) distributed 1.9 million pounds of food, making it the second largest food pantry in Maine. Formed in 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was emerging, the new food pantry is based out of the Winslow Congregational Church in central Maine.

“Our church building was the town’s original meeting house and has been here since 1828, and, as a congregation, we wanted to be more involved in our community,” said Bruce Bottigliere, operations manager for the WCC.

In early 2020, a group from the church met with Good Shepherd Food Bank, Maine’s largest hunger relief organization, to build more support with food security within their community. They proposed a food pantry that would be open twice a month and aimed to begin in September.

“Three days later, they called us asking how fast we could open because the only other pantry in town was closing,” Bruce shared. “March 28, 2020, was our first day, and we served 40 clients that week. Two years later, our pantry is open today, and we’ve already served 167 people with several hours left to go.”

The WCC now has 1,800 registered clients and serves residents from dozens of neighboring towns.

“My goal is to empty the food pantry. Why should we have to dust the food if I can fill someone’s pantry at home, save them some money that could go toward bills or a special treat for their family?” asked Bruce.

For Bruce, this mission is personal. “As an only child raised by one parent who often couldn’t work or drive, there were days I had to fend for myself. I never want to see someone else go through that and feel hungry,” he said.

In addition to their biweekly open pantry, the WCC’s model has several other moving parts. Like many pantries in the area, they also deliver food to 60 to 75 households every two weeks. Additionally, they used a grant to purchase refrigerated trailers and load them with fresh produce.

*Top photo courtesy of Kristi Letourneau, Winslow Community Cupboard*

June 2024



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Bruce Bottigliere, WCC operations manager. Photo credit: Gregory Rec, Portland Press Herald

“We bring these trailers to downtown areas in different communities, places with a lot of foot traffic. We park for two hours and hand out free fruits and vegetables. In some places, we’ll serve more than 200 families in those two hours,” said Bruce. “So far this year, we’ve served more than 16,000 families from almost 200 different towns in Maine.”

Because they formed during the pandemic, the WCC’s operations began entirely outside and continue that way today; however, with their growth, space has become challenging.

“We took over four out of the five available rooms in the building, and, at one point, we had 16 freezers inside our building. Over time, we have added multiple decks and a ramp as well as walk-in refrigerators and freezers,” said Bruce.

Space continued to be an issue, so they searched for other options. “We were looking for property for quite some time. We found this land and secured it with our general fund, but after a streak of unsuccessful grant applications, we were at risk of losing it,” he recalled.

When a grant administered through the Central Public Health District Coordinating Council (DCC) with funding from the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention became available, Bruce pursued it.



WCC food trailer. Photo credit: the WCC.

The grant was for federal funds dedicated to addressing gaps in the public health system that contributed to health inequities and disparities uncovered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic revealed gaps in food insecurity, and many partners across Maine are reporting that the need is higher now than it was at the start of the pandemic.

“Thanks to this grant, we now own the land and can begin focusing on preparing it for the next step in better serving our communities,” said Bruce.

Plans for the new land and facility include space for their drive-through model, a multipurpose building with warehouse space, offices, a thrift store, and community space.

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