

LOWELL SUN, November 21, 2009

Pepperell answers food drive's call

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Updated: 11/21/2009 06:36:20 AM EST

PEPPERELL -- A tight economy hasn't snuffed the spirit of giving in Pepperell, which has rallied behind a local nonprofit to provide a traditional holiday meal for families in need this Thanksgiving.

All told, 81 local households sought assistance through the holiday food drive, which was organized by the grassroots organization known as PACH (Pepperell Aid from Community to Home) Outreach.

According to PACH President Ellen Castellano, each of those households will receive a turkey, stuffing, potatoes, and all the fixings -- thanks to the generosity of local residents and businesses.

"They've been wonderful," she said. "The community has really come through quite strongly for us."

Castellano said school groups, church groups and local Scout troops all contributed by holding food drives. She also thanked all those who made individual gifts or donated turkeys by purchasing \$10 "paper turkeys" at Donelan's, adding the store really helped out by letting PACH use its cold storage space.

With donations in hand, Castellano said volunteers would spend several hours boxing the holiday food on Friday afternoon, so that families who sought aid from PACH can pick up the food at the Knights of Columbus building from 9 to 11 a.m. on Saturday.

While registration to receive help from the holiday assistance program closed on Nov. 13, PACH Outreach director Joan Goddard said they operate a food shelf year-round and Pepperell residents in need shouldn't hesitate to get in touch.

"If they're in need, they can contact us and we'll see what we can do," she said.

The food shelf is one of several services provided by PACH Outreach, which also provides personal-care items (such as diapers) and helps connect clients with government aid, such as fuel assistance and food stamps.

Castellano said the program is for Pepperell residents only, but serves a wide gamut of people under that heading, ranging from the working poor, the unemployed, seniors, and people who are disabled.

"It's to assist people in need, and, hopefully, that's a temporary thing," said PACH treasurer Sharon Mercurio. "Our goal is really to help people become self-reliant and advocate for themselves."

Toward that end, PACH Outreach is planning to put more emphasis in the coming year on its stewardship program, which provides one-on-one guidance for clients trying to improve their situations.

Castellano explained that PACH Outreach is still evolving in some respects, having been founded less than a year ago by essentially combining two existing aid programs in the community.

The original PACH program (which was Pepperell Aid from Church to Home) was founded by St. Joseph's Church in 1974, and was a fixture at the parish until being discontinued earlier this year. Similarly, Castellano said the Pepperell Senior Center had been operating a food shelf in recent years, but that endeavor had grown to the point where it was taking away from the center's other missions, and needed to be relocated elsewhere.

As a result, Castellano said the all-volunteer PACH Outreach was formed earlier this year. It's a new and independent group that has drawn on support from backers of the previous programs.

Castellano said the group is uncertain if they were going to continue PACH's tradition of doing a Christmas food drive, saying it may no longer be vital because of the year-round food shelf.

That said, Castellano urged residents to continue supporting the local food shelf. "A lot of food we're collecting now is going into the Thanksgiving boxes, so it won't be there for next week," she said.

"We're never all-set on food donations," she said. "As soon as people think you're all-set, you run out of food really quickly."

Located in the Knights of Columbus building at 19 Jersey St., PACH Outreach is open from 6-8 p.m. on Tuesdays, 1:30-3:30 p.m. on Thursdays, and the third Saturday of each month from noon-2 p.m. Donations for the food shelf are taken at the PACH office or at the Century 21 office at 111 Main St., daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m..

PACH Outreach can be contacted by calling 978-925-8052 or via e-mail at pepperell@pachoutreach.org.