



Cambridge Community Television

Home

Helping Hands Food Pantry Serves Up Weekly Staples and a Cambridge Food Festival

Food Pantries Fill a Continuing Role

Posted by [joansqueri](#) on Sep 3, 2013.



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First in a Series on Hunger and Health in Cambridge

Fresh Pond Apartments Cambridge, MA

Saint James Episcopal Church 1991 Mass Ave, Cambridge, MA 02140

See: [Cambridge Food Pantry Study](#)

Being out in the warmth of a spring breeze is a just little bit unusual for the folks who run the Helping Hands Food Pantry. The pantry staff are more used to the usual routine: moving boxes, stocking shelves and managing volunteers in a ground level space of the Fresh Pond apartments, where the Helping Hands Food Pantry is located. This spring, sponsors and staff of the Helping Hands Food Pantry got a chance to socialize with families they serve at an outdoor food festival, and a chance to experience the communal aspects of food and community in a more lighthearted way. It was a pleasure to witness.

Each month throughout the year, Helping Hands serves an astounding number of people: between 300 to 400 families with food supplies and referral services. Operating three days a week the food pantry budget stretches to serve about 30-32 people a day: a great accomplishment, but between 8-15 people may have to be turned away each of those days because there is not enough food to go around. It's worth mentioning that even in a wealthy city like Cambridge, Helping Hands is one of several food pantries with similar stories.

Like all food pantries, Helping Hands was designed in response to a short-term need. It started in the St. James Episcopal Church basement back when Ronald Regan was president. More than 30 years later, Helping Hand finds itself not only still in business, but serving a greater number of people than ever. Why?

As wealth disparity continues to increase in the US, food pantries have become the closest thing many have to a bridge for making ends meet each month, every month for years on end. For millions of Americans - many who have fallen out of the middle class into the category of the 'working-three-jobs-but-still-can't meet-basic-expenses-poor'- visiting a food pantry each month has become the only way to make those two or three scrawny paychecks stretch far enough to put food on the table.

The startling fact is that food pantries -- many run by communities of faith -- have become the safety net for nearly 1 out of 4 Americans.

Helping Hands is managed by St. James Episcopal Church (St. James, it should be noted, is actually two 'sister' churches: one St Mark's is in Porter Square, and the other St. Mark's is in Teele Square, Somerville).

The Rev. Karen Coleman is the Rector of the Teele Square Church as well as the executive director of the Helping Hands Food Pantry. The Helping Hands Pantry has moved out of the basement at the church and is now located in the Fresh Pond Apartments on Ridge Avenue in Cambridge, on a ground floor. Fresh Pond Apartments donates the space for the food pantry and the electricity to run the freezer and refrigerators.

In return, its residents receive the benefit of an on-site pantry; a win-win for the Church's budget and for the community residents it serves. Cambridge could use more enlightened community partnerships of this sort.

The Helping Hands staff of consists of Coleman and around twelve volunteers. Coleman works closely with Scott Cole, resident services coordinator at Fresh Pond Apartments. Helping Hands has conducted its own self study and gone well out into the Cambridge community, conducting its own study of other Cambridge food pantries and feeding programs. While it isn't fully comprehensive, it is a very apt effort by volunteers to envision a larger community problem.

Read SJEC's assessment of Cambridge services for the hungry [here](#).

This year, Coleman and her colleague, the Rev. Holly Antolini of the Porter Square Saint James, decided to extend their food pantry outreach to the wider community by holding a food festival complete with games for kids, an art tent, pie raffles, prizes, music, and servings of fresh, tasty, nutritious food made by community members for other community members to enjoy.

The festival was held on the lawn of the Fresh Pond Apartments in May. Surrounded by community members serving up their own healthy food samples, laughing kids and babies delighting in their first feel of grass between the toes was particular treat, Coleman said. The idea of a food festival began as a way to share information about healthy snacks, sample tasty food from many cultures and have fun, just being together as a community.

As the idea developed, it became clear it would draw attention to the work of the food pantry and provide a networking opportunity to those interested in expanding access to healthy foods to underserved communities.

North Cambridge Residents: Please visit the [Helping Hands Food Pantry website](#) to learn more about how you can be helped or to support the work of the Helping Hands Food Pantry

YOUR FOOD PANTRY NEEDS YOU!

St. James's Helping Hands Food Pantry needs you! We need people who can devote three-and-a-half hours to shadowing our Interim Food Pantry Director Karen Coleman and learning the ropes of the Pantry's operation at the Fresh Pond Apartments, 362 Rindge Ave., Cambridge. The Food Pantry is held each Tuesday (4 to 6 PM), Thursday (11 AM to 1 PM) and Saturday (10 AM to noon). There is about an hour's set-up and perhaps a half-hour clean-up for each Pantry session.

Coleman is looking to train up to three volunteers who would be able, if needed, to pinch-hit for her on occasion, overseeing her highly competent, experienced volunteers, so that she knows she has back-up if she needs it. This is your opportunity to meet a lot of fascinating folks on both sides of the food pantry counter and to see St. James's outreach in action.

If you think you could help, call Judith at 857.998.1777 or email at associaterecator@stjames-cambridge.org.