

Pantries add nonfood items to their offerings

By John Hilliard
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The region's food pantries, long working to provide nutritious food to hundreds of local families, are expanding their missions to provide personal hygiene and household cleaning items to customers.

The goal, officials say, is to ensure that people aren't faced with the impossible choice of staying fed or keeping clean.

"They're essential items. We wouldn't want our shoppers to be making the decision to choose between putting food on their table or brushing their teeth or cleaning their homes," said Tracie Longman, president of the Newton Food Pantry.

The pressure is especially acute since the federal program intended to allow low-income households to buy food — the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — doesn't cover household cleaning and personal hygiene products.

One out of every nine Massachusetts residents receives SNAP help to buy food, and that limitation can mean recipients face financial pressure to cover the costs of basic, but essential, products found in just about every cupboard, such as soap, detergent, and shampoo.

The number of SNAP recipients in Massachusetts dropped slightly in the past year: As of August, 765,353 people in Massachusetts took part in SNAP, according to the US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service agency.

That figure was about 7,000 fewer than the 772,604 participants reported in August 2016, according to federal data.

Those SNAP benefits generally don't last through the month, leaving recipients to turn to local pantries for help, said Stephanie Nichols, a spokeswoman for the Greater

Boston Food Bank, in a prepared statement.

The Boston-based food bank works with more than 500 local food pantries, shelters, and other programs.

The Greater Boston Food Bank set a record on Nov. 22 for the most food delivered in a single day — 646,000 pounds, or the equivalent of 538,000 meals, Nichols said.

On the ground, pantry operators say they haven't seen a letup in demand. That includes the Newton Food Pantry, which has about 100 volunteers, including approximately 70 who work year-round.

The Newton pantry, which serves 750 to 800 city residents each month, continues to seek out donations for food, as it has done since it was founded in 1983.

"There aren't fewer people out there who need assistance," Longman said.

But those outreach efforts now make clear that the pantry is seeking help in meeting families' personal needs as well.

Among the items area pantry officials said are most in demand are feminine hygiene products, the cost of which can be an extra burden on women living on limited incomes.

In Franklin, organizers of food drives are also seeking personal care items, said Erin Lynch, executive director of the Franklin Food Pantry.

"Those items are always in demand here, and those shelves are always low," said Lynch, who noted the requested donations have "helped tremendously" in supplying the pantry with care items.

She said people are surprised about the limitations placed on SNAP recipients.

"A lot of people don't realize you can't buy basic needs like shampoo and toilet paper and

toothpaste," Lynch said.

Cheryl DeAngelo, manager of the Daily Bread Food Pantry in Milford, said the organization has expanded its offerings for clients to include donated clothing, alongside food and care items.

"We try to provide the basic necessities of life. If they can't afford food, they can't afford a coat," she said.

At the Natick Service Council, which provides services including career development, financial assistance, and health programs, 595 Natick households sought assistance from the council's food pantry in October.

That's up from the 423 local households who used the pantry a year earlier.

The organization's "top 10 list" of needed items includes food and personal care items, said Lauren Mann, the organization's director of development and outreach.

"I think people are surprised about how much need there is in town," she said. "It's real, it's here."

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NEWTON FOOD PANTRY

The Newton Food Pantry stocks some of its shelves with household cleaning products.