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Serving West Side neighbors at the holidays – and beyond

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Dawanna Johnson, 44, plans to host about 20 family members for Christmas this year, thanks in no small part to the Above and Beyond Free Food Pantry in West Garfield Park.

After gushing about the holiday food she received from the pantry at Thanksgiving – including a whole turkey, fresh produce, and other fixings – Johnson’s family decided she should host Christmas, an “assignment” she was happy to accept.



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Johnson, who lives with her 18-year-old son, says there are limited options for grocery shopping in their community. And even if there were more options, the pair would struggle to afford groceries on his paychecks and her disability benefits, especially considering they often care for Johnson's two godchildren, ages 5 and newborn.



Dawanna Johnson leaves Above and Beyond with food for her family – and their Christmas meal. Photos by Abel Uribe for the Food Depository.

“I’m so happy to come here,” Johnson said of Above and Beyond before carrying her groceries to a nearby bus stop. She’s excited to share the ham and cheesecake she selected with her family at Christmas.

“I so appreciate it. And my family does too.”

Elevated needs

Johnson is one of 650 neighbors who registered for holiday food at Above and Beyond, and one of the 140,000 households in Chicago and Cook County that will receive a holiday meal from the Food Depository this season. Above and Beyond's three holiday food distributions in December are in addition to their regular pantry hours, when they consistently serve more than 100 guests six days a week.

The pantry is part of Above and Beyond Family Recovery Center, which offers a wide array of social services on the city's west side. Their board of directors launched the pantry in February 2021, in partnership with the Food Depository. "COVID was the impetus," said Ken Cozzi, executive director of the pantry.

But like most food-access partners in Chicago and Cook County, they haven't seen their neighbors' needs decrease since the pandemic, due to inflation, elevated food prices, and the rollback of vital pandemic-era public assistance programs.



Above and Beyond pantry has seen needs rise since they launched during the pandemic.

As a result of recent mounting challenges, more and more families are turning to food pantries for the first time. In fact, the Food Depository's network of partner food pantries served 28 percent more guests in October than the same month last year – a sobering reminder that hunger didn't diminish with the pandemic.

To meet the increased need, Above and Beyond has added additional distribution days to their schedule, including regular Saturday hours to accommodate those who work during the week, like Barbara Sturkey.

A big help

On a recent Monday, Barbara, 60, and her sister Linda, 58, were the first in line at Above and Beyond, arriving at 9:00 a.m. for the noon distribution. Barbara was there to get food for herself, her fiancé and her two grandkids, ages 10 and 5, who they often care for. Though Barbara and her fiancé both work, she said, "It's not enough to pay for groceries, rent and gas."





Barbara and Linda Sturkey say the pantry is a big help.

Barbara got excited when she saw cans of spaghetti rings on a shelf, explaining that her grandkids love them. She also picked up a bag of marshmallows for the s'mores they like to make together on their stovetop. Her sister Linda, who doesn't have a car, selected items for making soup, saying she's stocking up for winter, when it's harder to get out.

“This is a big help,” Barbara said, selecting a sweet potato pie for her family’s Christmas meal. “We get a lot of stuff here we wouldn’t be able to have otherwise.”

Beyond the holidays

Like Barbara, Brian Carroll is grateful for the pantry at the holidays – and well beyond. The single dad to two kids, ages 11 and 15, does his best to support his family on a fixed income.

“I’m not working right now as I’m dealing with some mental health issues,” he said. “Food stamps run out on the 9th, but there’s still more month left,” he said. That’s when he visits Above and Beyond. “Stuff like this helps,” he said, holding up bags of groceries from the pantry, including a ham he’s saving for Christmas day.



Brian Carroll is grateful the pantry helps him and his kids have enough food for the month.

About a week later, pantry guests received an extra holiday treat thanks to a partnership between the Food Depository and Timberland.



Through their “Timbs the Season” program, Timberland donated 200 new pairs of their Original Timberland Boots, which several of their staff members distributed to the pantry guests in addition to helping with the food distribution.

The Food Depository is grateful to provide our partner pantries with extra holiday foods this time of year, when many of our neighbors gather with family and friends for a celebratory meal. And we are equally grateful that our generous donors and dedicated partners are there long after the decorations have been put away, still working to create a hunger-free community.

