

Neighbors Helping Neighbors by Perri Black

The statistics are staggering.

Maine has been Vacationland and a popular playground for many affluent tourists for more than a century, *Bon Appetite* magazine named Portland the 2018 Restaurant City of the Year, and local farmers markets offer a cornucopia of luscious homegrown produce — yet the state ranks third in the nation for food insecurity. According to recent records, one in seven Mainers struggles with hunger and, tragically, one in five children in the state go hungry every day. That is more than 183,000 people in total and over 50,500 children. Something is VERY wrong with this picture.

Fortunately, some people are trying to do something about it. Four decades ago there were about 40 food pantries in Maine; today there are at least 400. In 2007, a number of concerned citizens in the tiny town of Sweden met in a private home on Knights Hill Road to find ways to improve access to food for local people in need — thus the Sweden Food Pantry (SFP) was born. Originally called



Sowing Seeds for Life, the pantry moved to its current location in the basement of the Sweden Community Church in 2008 and operated as a nonprofit organization under the umbrella of the church's 501(c)3 status. The pantry was granted its own 501(c)3 status this year and now functions separately from the church administration.

The SFP is an all-volunteer organization overseen by a board of eight members and funded by donations from individuals, towns, and businesses, as well as from churches and charitable and service organizations. It also hosts fundraising activities at the annual Sweden Days and other local events. The SFP's newly established 501(c)3 status also allows it to apply for federal and state grants as well as other funding to help maintain and expand its operations. All roles in the organization are fulfilled by dedicated volunteers who order and pick up food, stock shelves, help consumers with their "shopping," raise funds, and undertake the necessary tasks required to keep the pantry running smoothly.

Auburn-based Good Shepherd Food Bank works in conjunction with food pantries in the state to distribute food to Mainers in need. Despite Sweden's small population of less than 400 year-round residents, Good Shepherd asked the SFP to serve residents from Sweden, Waterford, Lovell, Fryeburg, Stoneham, and Stow. It has also helped families from Bridgton, Albany, Harrison, and Poland when they were unable to obtain food from other pantries. According to the most recent statistics, in 2017 the SFP served 902 families — a total of 1823 individuals.

Through a lot of hard work, and in collaboration with Good Shepherd and the local community, the SFP has established a reliable network of providers to keep its shelves stocked. Some of the monetary donations to the pantry are used to buy food at a significant discount from Good Shepherd and volunteers pick it up twice a month. As part of its community outreach program Hannaford supermarkets donate all types of food to food pantries and food banks across the state. An SFP volunteer picks up meat, dairy, bakery, and perishable items from Hannaford in Bridgton to distribute to consumers on the days the pantry is open. Nonperishable Federal surplus food is also picked up four times a year.

In addition to donations from individuals, food drives, and civic organizations, many local farmers and gardeners contribute fresh produce to the SFP. The Waterford and Lovell libraries grow gardens to provide food for the pantry and some commercial growers in the area make regular donations.

Through Good Shepherd's farm-to-pantry program "Mainers Feeding Mainers" Green Thumb Farm in Fryeburg donates 50 pounds of potatoes to the pantry each month and Weston's Farm (also in Fryeburg) gave the pantry 2,725 pounds of produce in 2017. Pietree Orchard in Sweden also regularly donates fruit and vegetables to the SFP throughout the year.

Some people have a less than positive perception about who gets food from the pantry. The truth is that anyone can be thrown into a position of food insecurity at any time. The loss of a job or home, a death in the family, divorce, illness, natural disasters, accidents, and even just growing old are some of the factors that can result in food insecurity. Anyone in the state of Maine who meets the income requirements outlined in the federal guidelines of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is eligible to obtain food from the pantry. However, the SFP mission states that no one is turned away.

Life in northern New England is expensive and the cost of food in Maine is above the national average. Maine also has one of the oldest populations in the country. Many food pantry users are fully employed or living on Social Security but still don't have enough money coming in to pay the bills. Food from the pantry helps individuals and families make ends meet, and in many cases it simply helps people get through a temporary rough patch. Some of the SFP volunteers were, and still are, food pantry consumers. Working for the pantry is a way for them to give back to the community and reciprocate for the help the SFP has provided them.

In addition to "shopping" for food, the SFP offers its consumers other services. If someone is unable to get to the pantry, they can call ahead to arrange for volunteers to pack a "to go" box for a friend to pick up for them. Emergency food boxes are available upon request and Wayside Food Programs, sponsored by the USDA, packs up boxes of staple foods for seniors (60+), which are handed out at the SFP once a month.

Alana Nataluk and Jade Blood of Lovell Girl Scout Troop #58 made "Birthday Bags" containing items to help SFP consumers with children or grandchildren create fun birthday parties. In addition to earning the girls their Silver Award, the bags were a big hit with consumers. In 2017, the SFP participated for the first time in the U.S. Marine Corps Toys for Tots Foundation program that provides Christmas gifts for local children and plans to take part again this year.

Many, if not most, towns in Maine have a food pantry and they are all working hard to fight against hunger. So, what makes the SFP special? When asked, most consumers say it is the welcoming, upbeat atmosphere created by both volunteers and participants. Everyone is very friendly and non-judgmental — "regulars" get to know each other and become friends and newcomers are welcomed with a smile. The SFP has become like a family that cares about its members and shows concern for their well-being.

Sweden and the surrounding towns are very rural, and residents often live far apart. Isolation is a significant issue and the SFP serves as a sort of bi-monthly "neighborhood watch." Consumers gather in the church before the pantry opens to socialize and catch up on each other's lives. If a regular doesn't show up as expected, someone will call them or stop by to make sure they are okay and bring them a "to go" box if necessary. If someone is experiencing a difficult time and needs assistance, SFP volunteers are there to advise on various resources.

Everyone who uses the food pantry has their own unique story to tell, and the SFP community is there to listen and help when they can. Some of the stories are fascinating and quickly dispel any pre-conceived negative ideas about food pantry consumers. No one in this country should go hungry, and no one should be quick to judge. Remember —you just might be the next person facing food insecurity. But rest assured: the Sweden Food Pantry will not turn you away.

The SFP is located in the basement of the Sweden Community Church, 137 Bridgton Rd. (Rte. 93) in Sweden, Maine. It is open the first and third Wednesday of the month from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. New volunteers are always welcome, and anyone interested in helping should contact the director, Linda Bradley, at 647-8419.