

## SEM FOOD PANTRY

Thanks for your interest in the SEM Food Pantry! SEM stands for Southeastern Ecumenical Ministries, an organization started in 1967 consisting of a group of area churches that banded together to better serve neighbors who needed some assistance in their lives. In 1982, a central food pantry was started, beginning in a basement of an area church, moving to a caretakers house on the property and then to a temporary location in a basement of an IHM house when the caretakers house was declared uninsurable and subsequently torn down.

In 2020, we found a property that was located in Mt. Washington, an area of greater food insecurity than Anderson, that had the qualities we were looking for in a forever home – large space, no steps, adequate parking and on a bus line. The 6200 square foot building was for sale for \$375,000 and had been on the market for a number of months. We contacted the owner, Health Source of Ohio, to see if they might rent the building to us. They agreed and offered a very attractive, low rent.

The building was comprised of 3 suites, the largest of which was 3200 square feet and the area we needed for the pantry. The space used to house an old pool hall and bar. The walls were stripped to the studs, no ceiling, falling insulation, non-working HVAC units on the roof, no bathroom facilities and a rough concrete floor.

In a leap of faith, we signed a rental agreement and set out to raise \$200,000 to renovate the space. By July 30, 2020 we completed the fund raising and the renovation lowering the cost to \$150,000 using sweat equity and less expensive fixtures. On August 1, we officially opened the new pantry, not shutting down for even a day during the move.

We are an all-volunteer operation – no one gets a paycheck- encompassing over 70 people that handle the phone and computer, assist clients to shop, carry food to their vehicles and pick up and shelve items donated to or purchased by the pantry. Most of our food is sourced from the FreeStore FoodBank where we make almost weekly pick-ups. We also have retail partners that donate food weekly to the pantry, such as Kroger (Cherry Grove), Target (Cherry Grove and Oakley), Walmart (Amelia), Aldi (Eastgate and Cherry Grove) and several Starbucks locations. We also get weekly donations from LaSoupe and Matthew 25. In 2022, we distributed over 400,000 pounds of groceries to 16,593 hungry neighbors, up 51% from the previous year.

We are open from 10 – 2 Monday – Friday, 10 – noon Saturdays and 5:30 to 7 on Tuesday evenings. Except for a few snow days, we have not had to close even during the COVID era.

Our clients can come as often as once every 30 days. We typically serve clients residing in eastern Hamilton county and all of Clermont county. We will not turn anyone away that comes for food. For those residing outside of our normal service area, we give them food and refer them to a pantry closer to where they live.

We try not to let any food go to waste. Any extra food goes either to Belterra Park or Turfway racetracks. We make sandwiches each week to send to Our Daily Bread to help feed homeless in downtown Cincinnati. We provide any extra food to the Anderson Senior Center, a homeless center and to a "free shelf" outside our pantry. We also send overripe produce to an animal rescue organization. We also recycle all our extra cardboard boxes.

Beginning in May, we initiated a Senior Box program, providing extra food each month to seniors over 60 that fall under the income guidelines established by the US government. Our first month gave out 95 boxes and to date we have another 40 seniors requesting assistance.

We will have been in our new, forever location 3 years this August. Our next venture is a drive to complete the purchase of the building. We are 2 years into the purchase agreement and would like to retire the mortgage by mid 2024. The assessed value of the building for insurance purposes is 3 times the price we will have paid for the building when we own it outright.

I invite anyone that would like to see the pantry first hand to come for a visit. We would love to show it to you. Thanks for all the support you have provided us and hope you will continue to support the SEM Food Pantry in the future!