

Food Pantry Survey In Progress

BY SARAH WETZEL
For the Plain Talk

The Vermillion Food Pantry is out to see if their new system is ideal for those they serve and to get ideas for more possible improvements.

"In October of last year, the pantry transitioned to a client choice system," said Jessica McKenzie, Food Pantry Director. "This means that we're now set up more like a grocery store, and our families can select the items (within limits that we set) that work best for their specific situations instead of getting a standard box each month."

According to McKenzie, the pantry also changed operating hours adding a night shift so families with traditional working hours are able to attend.

"Another change we have made is that we have a volunteer who can meet with clients to talk about their specific situation and recommend other services – both governmental and community-based – that might offer additional help," she said. "Finally, we've really been trying to bring in more fresh food to the pantry. We're encouraging donations from farmers market sellers and patrons, and we've increased donations of bread from Mr. Smith's Bakery and Hy-Vee

and of meat and produce from Wal-Mart. Those relationships are really helping us provide healthier, more nutritious food to our clients."

The survey currently in progress is in response to these changes according to McKenzie.

"We want to see how our clients are reacting to the changes we have made," she said. "What do they like? What could we be doing better? We have questions about the quality of our food, the hours we are open, what they would like to see more of, and what they really don't need. All of this will better inform our future plans, especially as we go about creating a strategy to accommodate the growing number of families that use our services. We're also hoping to find out how many of our clients depend on external sources for transportation to and from the pantry and if translation services are needed, among other things."

Clients are asked to fill out the paper survey when they come in for services, the last day being September 30.

"We are hoping that clients who even use our services once or twice a year will come in to provide that feedback for us," McKenzie said. "It's the only way we can improve."

According to McKenzie, the feedback on the changes is expected to be mostly positive.

"We've anecdotally heard positive responses to the changes we have made," she said. "Many people comment that it is exciting to choose the items that they want. Client choice fits so well with people's individual taste preferences, dietary needs and health issues, so that has been great for our clients."

There also seems to be a positive response for the hour changes.

"We've seen people coming to the Thursday night hours that we added, so we know there is an appreciation for that," McKenzie said. "And clients have begun to sign up for a meeting about other forms of assistance. The survey is a way to gather all of their feedback in a more official manner. The hope is that this is something we could do annually to gauge how we are fitting with the needs of the community. Over time, the survey results could tell a pretty interesting story."

It's a story that needs telling to best serve around 500 people each month according to McKenzie.

"We see a peak in our usage around the first and last weeks of the month," she said. "July/August and

the holiday months tend to be our busiest. Last year, we served over 450 families from Clay County, and we are on track to serve even more this year."

A feat not possible without assistance from many volunteers.

"Community involvement is vital to VFP's existence," McKenzie said. "We are a fully volunteer-run non-profit. Not one of us is paid to do what we do, so the pantry is dependent on the actions of many to serve. We have around 100 volunteers, many of whom volunteer once or twice a month, and do everything from stocking to helping clients to picking up food donations from local busi-

nesses. Without so much community involvement, we could not serve around 6,000 people each year.

"Community feedback with the survey is also vital, because we exist to serve," McKenzie continued. "We want to know that we are providing the best possible service to Clay County; the survey will let us know how far we have to go."

In the meantime, resources are available for those looking to both receive assistance and give service through volunteering.

"Over the past year, we have revamped our website (www.vermillionfoodpantry.org) and Facebook page (Vermillion Food Pantry),"

McKenzie said. "Our website has tons of information on donating and volunteering, including an updated wish list, volunteer applications, and what you need to do to get our assistance. The Facebook page is a great place to see what items are new to the pantry that week (like if we have a huge amount of produce to give away) and we do a thing called 'Wish List Wednesday' where we post an urgent donation need for the pantry. Community members can visit those pages, e-mail us at info@vermillionfoodpantry.org, or call/text 605-670-3409 if they have questions, comments, or concerns."

Students

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will be 1,300-1,400 students moving in throughout the course of the day. Then at 4 p.m. we will have convocation for the students and follow that up with the provost's picnic welcoming everyone to campus."

Pohlson said he most enjoys watching the faces of the people coming through registration.

"There is always that look on their faces that they are nervous to be here, but they are excited," he said. "The parents, you can tell the ones that have taken students to college before and those (for whom) this is this first time. The best thing about the day is to see who brings what. Like this big truck that is coming through the line. You wonder what are they bringing and where are they going to put it? It is fun. It is a good mix of students from South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, Colorado and all of them bring different pieces to the mix."

He noted that it is not only a big change for the students and their families, but also for the community. In an effort to increase the students' knowledge of what Vermillion offers, they have started a new program called the Vermillion Cup Club.

"We are giving both students and parents a red Vermillion cup that has the Vermillion logo and the USD logo on the side," Pohlson said. "We are asking the businesses to partner with us to give some sort of deal or discount for coming into their business. That is honestly the biggest thing that is going to run throughout the year and hopefully into the future. So far, we have 10 different businesses that have partnered with us."

With move-in activities ending, the next big step of the weekend began as the USD marching band led the new students to the DakotaDome where they were welcomed by Kim Grieve, vice president of Student Services, USD Student Government president Sami Zoss, Dr. Jim Moran, vice president of academic affairs and USD President James W. Abbott.

Grieve spoke first to the parents, encouraging them to tell their students to get involved while on campus. She then challenged the students.

"You have made your first impression, now it is time to make a lasting impression," she said. "Get involved, set high standards for yourself, make good choices, build long-lasting, diverse relationships and be proud to be a Coyote."

Abbott stressed that the students were not alone.

"The staff of USD are here to make your experience as rich and rewarding as possible," he said. "USD is a surprisingly intricate community of people and places and experiences. You will work hard here, you will be challenged here and you will have unparalleled opportunities here. You will grow and contribute in ways you may not imagine today. I urge you to take the opportunity to try things you have never tried before and to forge relationships with people whose interests and life experiences are different from your own."

He also said the students should be proud of what they are bringing to the campus.

"Your class adds new energy, new talents and enthusiasm," Abbott said. "It adds new skills, new passions to our university. Take full advantage of all (that) the University of South Dakota has to offer. Explore new ideas and experiences. Seek out new ways to connect with those around you and reach out. Look for ways to make a difference even when you are working for your place in the world. Remember to share what is happening to you with those most eager for you to succeed, your families. You have come to USD in search of the best education possible and we will do all within our power to provide you with just that."

Abbott added that he was confident there is no better way to prepare students for the challenges of the future than to be well educated at USD.

"Make no mistake about it, the precise path your educational journey will take will be determined by you," he said. "Focus on your studies. Keep your eyes and mind open to the unexpected opportunities and extraordinary opportunities both inside and outside the classrooms and laboratories."

Zoss said she had five words of wisdom for the students.

1. The time at college really flies. Enjoy it.
2. Make your own impact. The Coyote legacy is a collective one for sure, but make your impact in your own way.
3. Go To Class. It is the easiest way to stay up to date on your classwork, which is what each of us is here for.
4. Order pizza at one in the morning with your friends. Some of my best memories were made on the spur of the moment.
5. Stretch. Stretch out of your comfort zone. Stretch out of that little bubble that we put ourselves in and you will continue to grow in ways that you never imagined. Memories are not made doing the same things over and over again. It is up to you to make the most of the home you have made here.

Following convocation, Zoss said she could have spoken to the students for hours rather than a few minutes.

"I wish I could have said more about going to class," she said. "We have all had that one class where it is easy to miss and, all of a sudden, it is finals week and you have no idea what is going on."

She also said that she would have stressed more to live USD life.

"I just can't emphasize how much you need to emphasize how much you need to make USD your home," she said. "My family moved away halfway through my college career, and I embraced it. My teachers really did become my role models. This is my home, this is my family and I just can't emphasize enough how important it is to make sure that USD is your home, not just the place you go to school."

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