

COUNTY GEM

CIRCLE OF CONCERN FOOD PANTRY

by alexa beattie

FOOD INSECURITY IS NOT JUST THE PROVINCE OF THE POOR.

Falling on hard times can happen to anyone. A job loss, an illness or a broken marriage can mean sudden financial strain, and often, says Cynthia Miller, executive director of Circle of Concern Food Pantry, having enough to eat becomes a challenge. According to the Food and Research Action Center (FRAC), nearly one in four American households with children reports an inability to afford enough food. As a state, Missouri ranks in the top 20 for food insecurity, with more than 350,000 children living in food insecure households.

Circle of Concern, which started out as an entirely volunteer organization of concerned individuals, was formed in 1967 to address issues of poverty among rural communities in west St. Louis County. Today—50 years later—it has a four-person staff, 350 active volunteers and a 6,500-square-foot facility in Valley Park that serves around 4,000 West County residents annually. Its operating budget of almost \$2.3 million covers nutrition and many other programs as well.


“Because we believe education is key to getting out of poverty, we have a strong focus on scholarships,” Miller says. Not only is money allocated for high school seniors going to college, but it’s also given to adults who may need help finishing a degree or obtaining a license, she explains. Last year’s scholarship budget was \$58,000; this year, Circle of Concern expects to award more than \$90,000 in scholarships. Over the course of 50 years, the charity has given out more than \$1 million in educational grants.

Circle of Concern also provides emergency financial assistance for utilities, rent and other expenses, and offers a variety of children’s programs. A Back to School initiative distributes school supplies and backpacks. And

a Summer Opportunities program gives clients’ children access to local camps, sports teams and other enrichment that their families otherwise might be unable to afford.

Miller stresses that one of the nonprofit’s chief goals is maintaining client dignity. “It’s hard for people to walk through those doors and ask for help,” she says. “But these often are people who have done everything they were supposed to do in life—low and middle income, hard-working folks affected by things beyond their control.” She adds that the number of clients served went up sharply during the recession between 2008 and 2010, and recently has spiked in the wake of local flooding. Single mothers with school-age children are the largest group served, followed by fixed-income seniors, seasonal workers and the underemployed (or working poor).

While its pantry is the nonprofit’s principal service, Miller is keen to say it does more than hand out bags of food. Clients come monthly by appointment and, in addition to receiving a one- to two-week supply of groceries, meet with a trained volunteer to discuss any hardship issues. “The practice of sitting with someone and talking through problems helps families progress [out of hardship] more quickly,” Miller explains. Groceries include fresh fruits and vegetables, milk and other dairy products, frozen meats, canned goods and some personal care items.

To mark its half-century, Circle of Concern hosts its first gala Nov. 4 at Forest Hills Country Club in Chesterfield, with proceeds to support its programs. The evening includes live music, an auction and a balloon raffle. Dana and Ryan Dean of Newschannel 5 KSDK will serve as mistress and master of ceremonies. KMOX’s Maria Keena will sing alongside members of the Original Knights of Swing. 

CIRCLE OF CONCERN HOSTS ITS FIRST GALA NOV. 4 AT FOREST HILLS COUNTRY CLUB IN CHESTERFIELD. THE EVENING INCLUDES LIVE MUSIC, AN AUCTION AND A BALLOON RAFFLE. PICTURED ON THE COVER: KMOX ANCHOR AND CIRCLE OF CONCERN BOARD MEMBER MARIA KEENA; KSDK 5 ON YOUR SIDE ANCHORS AND EVENT EMCEES RYAN AND DANA DEAN; CIRCLE OF CONCERN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CYNTHIA MILLER. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL 636.861.2623, EXT.117 OR VISIT CIRCLEOFCONCERN.ORG.

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