

The Darley Neighbourhood House Community Pantry: Food relief without the stigma

By Rachel Jackson



The community pantry at the Darley Neighborhood house is stocked with non-perishable food items. (Photo: Rachel Jackson)

There will be a greater reliance on food relief and welfare agencies as people on Centrelink benefits lose the extra funds given to them during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to social worker Lucy Dodemaide.

“People’s need for these services doesn’t start at 9am and finish at 5pm like the welfare sector dictates,” Ms Dodemaide said.

Ms Dodemaide said most community services and government funded initiatives are only open for limited hours, which makes them largely inaccessible to the community.

In 2020, a Bacchus Marsh council lead group established an emergency supply pantry at the Darley Neighborhood House, providing community members with 24/7 discrete access to food and sanitary items.

Manager of the neighbourhood house, Renae Knight, said there were many people in the community out of work who would find accessing food relief confronting.

"Having something that was unstructured, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week for people to access was really appealing," said Ms Knight.

Ms Knight said people in Bacchus Marsh have access to food relief at the Neighbours' Place, but it is a more structured program and operates within limited hours.

"They do an amazing job," Ms Knight said. "But you do have to bring identification and meet certain criteria to access the food relief."

There is a stigma attached to accessing food relief and some individuals and families struggle to reach out for help, according to Ms Dodemaide.

"Anonymity is certainly important for those who are feeling embarrassed or too proud or even intimidated by accessing these services," said Ms Dodemaide.

Operating the 24/7 pantry does not come without risk, according to Ms Knight.

"I'll be honest, it didn't come without giving it some real thought," said Ms Knight.

Ms Knight said there have been instances of minor damage and unwanted behavior since opening the pantry last year, but the reward outweighs the risk.

"A little bit of damage here and there is nothing compared to the impact of being able to provide someone who is doing it really tough with a little bit of food, said Ms Knight.

The pantry is "purely community driven", and provides more fortunate members of the community with the opportunity to donate items to people in need, according to Ms Knight.

"It's run for the community by the community," Ms Knight said. "That's what I love the most about it."

Ms Knight said the pantry was intended to be a six-month project, but it is now going to be a part of the house for the "long haul".

There is also a bin located in the local Darley IGA supermarket, where people can buy a couple of extra items and donate after shopping, according to Ms Knight.

Ms Dodemaide said it is important that communities are mindful, patient and understanding of people's circumstances following the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The problem is more often than not caused by the system that we impose socially, economically and politically around them, not something they choose willingly for themselves," said Ms Dodemaide.

If you or anyone you know are struggling call:

Lifeline on 13 11 14

1800RESPECT

Headspace on 1800 650 890

National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on 1800 250 015

SANE Australia on 1800 18 7263