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MCFOODS Forum Pores Over Local Poverty Struggle

MIDDLESEX COUNTY – In its 21-year history, the Middlesex County food pantry’s annual networking meeting has set the stage for organizations on the frontlines of poverty to air growing concerns, while connecting with resources.

This year’s gathering drew the usual crowd – local pantries, churches and social service agencies – to a meeting room at the Middlesex County Fire Academy in Sayreville Aug. 3.

There, event sponsor, the Middlesex County Food Organization and Outreach Distribution Services, best known as MCFOODS, made one of the bigger announcements of the day.

Jennifer Apostol, project manager with Middlesex County Improvement Authority, the entity tasked with MCFOODS’ operation, confirmed that the regional pantry’s distribution center would relocate from New Brunswick to East Brunswick by late August.

“While we will remain in a central location, this means a more expansive working space for our staff,” she said. “We would hope in time that this new site could accommodate refrigeration and more storage area for surplus food.”

After taking its place at the podium, Coming Home of Middlesex County, a nonprofit that collaboratively works to eradicate regional homelessness, pointed to the many challenges faced by low-income and disadvantaged residents, as well as the organizations that serve them.

Bobbin Paskell, assistant director of systems at Coming Home, noted a local void of drop-in shelters for women, as well as South County shelters in general.

Still another hurdle to clear is the short supply of heating and cooling centers, a much-needed accommodation for residents struggling through extreme weather conditions, said John Ferguson, coordinator for Middlesex County’s Office of Emergency Management.

“Currently, during these cold weather emergencies, Elijah’s Promise in New Brunswick is open to anyone, including individuals and families,” Apostol said.

Susan Stephenson-Martin from Rutgers’ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP-ED was also on hand, promoting the university’s “Faithfully Fit Program,” a major source of information on nutrition, physical activity and safe-food access.

Similarly, the leadership at United Way of Central Jersey looked to spread the word about its free income-tax preparation offerings, which are made available to low-income individuals each year.

In closing, the Community FoodBank of New Jersey, which serves 18 of the state’s 21 Counties, discussed its conversion to online forms, a third possible day of deliveries, as well as a new diaper pilot program.

“We wish that homelessness and hunger weren’t an issue for Middlesex County,” said Freeholder Deputy Director Carol Bellante. “Unfortunately, that remains to be seen in this day and age, and we are combating these issues from all sides. In that respect, this meeting provides a platform, in which the major players in both of these arenas can work cohesively and learn from each other’s experiences.”

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