

OAKLAND COUNTY

Jewish food bank provides kosher options in the face of food insecurity

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Berkley — The Yad Ezra kosher food bank bustled late last month with at least 25 volunteers shopping for food-insecure clients in the Metro Detroit Jewish community, a tradition that started 33 years ago to fill an unmet need for kosher goods in food pantries.

While a lot of common foods are kosher, including Jif peanut butter and Oreos, it can be difficult to find things such as kosher meats in general food pantries, said Daniella Mechnikov, Yad Ezra's executive director.

The bank feeds around 1,500 households and 4,000 people a month. People can apply to access the bank and have to attest to their income and Jewish identity. Individuals or families must make less than 250% of the appropriate national poverty level to be eligible but don't have to provide proof of income.

"People won't come to get food if there are too many barriers," Mechnikov said. "So barrier-free food pantries are really always the goal, removing the barriers for people who are food insecure."

Buying kosher foods is generally more expensive, and the bank is funded by a combination of private donations and grants.

The kosher dietary laws originally come from the Bible, and rabbis have developed them for modern-day life, Mechnikov said. Key rules specify that all animals used must be slaughtered in the most humane way possible, pork is prohibited, meats and cheese can't mix and all processed foods require rabbinic supervision.

Most of Yad Ezra's food is bought, specifically meat, but some gets donated by private individuals and community partners such as Gleaners Forgotten Harvest, Mechnikov said.

Clients choose their items from a shopping list and volunteer shoppers such as Susan Sugarman assemble the food then deliver it to their cars.

Sugarman, of West Bloomfield Township, has been volunteering at the food bank for 12 years.

"I had retired not long before and decided to, you know, come in and be doing this," said Sugarman, who volunteers three days a week. "Certainly it gets me up, keeps me busy. ... I can be a resource."

Yad Ezra is also an emergency food pantry and won't turn people away, even if they aren't Jewish.

"There are non-Jews who come here. They get a full distribution of groceries," Mechnikov said. "We don't turn anyone away when they come, and then we try to refer them to colleagues, to sister agencies where buying kosher food isn't part of their budget."

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the demand for their services has increased by roughly a third, Mechnikov said. They see needs spike around Jewish holidays in the fall like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as well as Passover in the spring.

Over the winter holiday breaks, some children don't have access to school lunches, also creating an increased need, Mechnikov said. One-time, non-Jewish clients generally increase around this time, as well.

Benefits from the Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides temporary food assistance for eligible low-income families and individuals, were increased due to the COVID-19 emergency but returned to pre-pandemic levels in March. This, combined with a difficult economy has pushed a lot of people previously on the cusp of food insecurity over the edge, Mechnikov said.

"If people are thinking about what to do with their tax-deductible donations at the end of the year, any donations to food pantries or to anywhere to help with food insecurity... are really so essential," Mechnikov said.

While Yad Ezra isn't getting any less money than in prior years, food expenses have gone through the roof and demand is up, Mechnikov said.

The food bank also works with Jewish Family Services to refer clients if they need additional help.

Elana Lambert, a social worker and community-based resource coordinator with Jewish Family Services, will be stationed at Yad Ezra during client hours to connect people with resources, including case management, mental health, housing, employment and medical services.

"Our goal with our case management programs is to be self-sufficient — so anything that we can do to support our clients in getting to that self-sufficiency," said Ilana Woronoff, resource center supervisor with Jewish Family Services. "If someone's needing food, there's likely other things they can also benefit from. So it's a good place to locate and be available to those that need assistance."

The ongoing Israel-Hamas War that followed attacks on Israeli civilians on Oct. 7 has increased tensions and anxiety throughout the community, Mechnikov said. She received an antisemitic, threatening email last month and for the first time had security during their turkey distribution ahead of Thanksgiving.

"Our clients, who are our most vulnerable population — they're all members of the Jewish community, and they're also dealing with this heightened anxiety because of a war and ... anxiety about antisemitism in the world," Mechnikov said. "It's important for us to be a stable presence in their life so they know that they don't have to worry about food ever."

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