

Chippewa Valley students donate food to local nonprofits

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Photo by Sean Work

Members of Shawnee Elementary School's student council sort through boxes of canned goods during a field trip to Hope Center in Macomb on Nov. 25.



Photo by Sean Work

Shawnee fourth-grader Tyler Harper helps organize cans of soup at Hope Center, a Fraser-based food pantry that assists families all over Macomb County.



Photo by Sean Work

Fifth-grader Addy Mislevy reaches up to place some items on the shelves of the pantry.

MACOMB TOWNSHIP/CLINTON TOWNSHIP/FRASER — With its annual food drive for Hope Center in Macomb, Shawnee Elementary School doesn't just collect items for the organization's food pantry — it also helps to personally deliver, organize and stock them.

Every year, after the Macomb Township school has finished donating hundreds of pounds of food to Hope Center, its Student Council takes a field trip to the Fraser food pantry. There, they tour the facility and spend a couple of hours sorting through all the items that Shawnee's nearly 900 students were able to provide for local families in need.

According to Shawnee principal Sarah Simon, "Our kids really get the whole experience this way. I think this takes our food drive to the next level where kids can see how what they do really impacts other people's lives. It lets them see the whole picture and have a better understanding of how much they can truly make a difference in the world."

This year marked another successful food drive at Shawnee. The school was able to collect more than 1,100 pounds of food for Hope Center during the week of Nov. 17-21, which was then loaded up on three flatbed trucks and transported to the pantry.

Hope Center in Macomb is a no-cost "client choice" food pantry that is set up in a grocery store format. Individuals and families can shop for their own nonperishable food items, personal care/hygiene products, and paper products. They can access the pantry a maximum of six times per year and no more than once every 30 days. The amount of food that they can take is also limited by weight, based on the number of people in their household.

Karla Gardner, Hope Center's director of donor relations, agreed with Simon that it's a good experience for students to be able to visit the food pantry and witness people shopping there firsthand.

"Most elementary school kids don't understand that people who are hungry look just like you and me," she said. "The people who come to our pantry are their friends and neighbors — they're not usually homeless people living out on the street."

According to Gardner, one out of six people in Macomb County don't know where their next meal is coming from. In addition, there are 60,000 students in the county's schools who are eligible for free or reduced lunches. At Hope Center, donations to the food pantry typically increase during the holidays, but the demand remains steady year-round, as the facility serves about 100 families each day.

"I always say that hunger knows no holiday," Gardner said. "Our demand does not increase just because it's the winter. We're seeing an increase in demand right now, but that's because of other economic factors, not because it's the holiday season."

Several years ago, when Shawnee was looking for a food pantry to assist, the school quickly decided on Hope Center because of its "client choice" approach and its local focus.

"Those are just a couple of the many reasons why we love Hope Center," Simon said. "They are located right here in Macomb County, so all the food we donate is helping our own friends and neighbors. Hope Center really is an outstanding organization."

Several other Chippewa Valley schools also recently held food collection drives for the Clinton Township Kiwanis Club. Iroquois Middle School and Ottawa, Cheyenne and Ojibwa elementary schools were a few of those who spent the majority of their November piling up nonperishable food items on the club's behalf.

Iroquois principal Chris Gardner reported that his school of just over 1,000 students was able to collect a total of 4,069 items. These donations were not able to fit in the U-Haul truck that arrived at the school on Nov. 24, so an additional four or five cars had to be loaded up.

"It was awesome to see so many kids taking part in this program," Gardner said. "They all really responded to what we were trying to do, and it was pretty powerful to be able to witness that."

Gardner credited eighth-grade guidance counselor Lynn Dawson for spearheading the program, as well as Iroquois' Student Council and National Junior Honor Society. He believes that community service has been a big part of the school's culture from the beginning.

“That giving nature is really what makes Iroquois such a special place,” he said. “We’re a building that has always taken a tremendous amount of pride in giving back to our community.”

Kiwanis Club member Bill Lakin pointed out that his organization has held a holiday food drive for at least the past 20 years. It recently expanded the program to include the Chippewa Valley and L’Anse Creuse school districts. Once all the food has been collected, the club utilizes social workers within both districts to determine which local families are most in need of help.

In addition to its partnerships with schools like Iroquois, the Kiwanis Club collaborates with local boy scout troops, key clubs and other groups, before pitching in about \$8,000 of its own funds toward the program.

This year’s food drive will conclude this Saturday, Dec. 6, when the club will distribute its food to about 400 Macomb County families.

“This program is totally dependent on the generosity of the students and families in our local school districts,” Lakin explained. “We wouldn’t be able to assist any of these needy families without their help. This truly is a community food drive.”

For more information on Hope Center in Macomb, contact Karla Gardner at kgardner@hopecentermacomb.org or at (586) 491-2924. For more information on the Clinton Township Kiwanis Club, email clintontownshipkiwanis@gmail.com.

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