Upgraded and Expanded Food Service and Food Pantry to Serve Downtown Juneau

Summary

Due to the relocation of Juneau’s primary homeless shelter to the Mendenhall Valley and a consolidation of food pantries in Juneau, Resurrection Lutheran Church (RLC) has become the primary (if not the sole) provider of both food services (during the winter) and food pantry. RLC did not set out to serve these roles but has always stepped up when called. However, having done so, and has been requested by the City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ) and other social service agencies to continue to do so, it needs help.

Background

RLC Warming Shelter 2021/22 Operation Summary

In what ended up being a particularly harsh winter for those without stable housing, the RLC Warming Shelter during its 2021/22 operation:

* was open 100% from November 17th to April 15th (expectation was 80%) due to near 32° and below for entire season, opening as early as 9 pm when near 0°;
* provided 3,535 shelter nights for 346 unique patrons at a cost of $46 per night, where each patron stayed an average of 10 nights and 63% of patrons stayed five or fewer nights;
* hosted 30 to 40 patrons each night (expectation was up to 28), providing a hot, freshly prepared, nutritious dinner and breakfast; and
* every patron welcome to return next night, regardless of prior behavior, while treating each patron in accordance with RLC guest service guidelines (based on Disney Institute).

While RLC stepped in to operate the shelter last winter when its previous operator abandoned the contract, the CBJ has indicated it wishes RLC to continue to operate the shelter downtown. RLC also learned that there was a significant need for food services (dinner and breakfast) during the shelter operating period for non-shelter patrons. It allowed these patrons to use these services, even when they did not stay at the shelter. The RLC Warming Shelter, as the RLC Food Pantry, gets 90% of its food from the SE Alaska Food Bank and is its largest customer (and is a member).

RLC Food Panty operates the largest food pantry in Juneau feeding 150 to 200 individuals and families each week, allowing patrons to select their own foods in an unique 100’ COVID-safe mobile food line (paid for with a Rasmuson grant in 2021). RLC believed the RLC Food Pantry, budgeted for $9,000.00 was adequately funded and equipped.

Unfortunately, due to a number of factors, both programs were underfunded. In the case of the RLC Warming Shelter, the extremely harsh winter necessitated the shelter operate 100% open days (budgeted for 80%) and the average number of patrons was 35 to 40 (expected 28). We also opened early (9 pm instead 10:30 pm) for most of January when the nighttime temperature was near zero incurring a lot of overtime. This used up all the fixed-price contract fee. However, the wear and tear on downstairs of the church (virtually unused since CCS daycare 12 years ago) and additional fire alarm systems was about $15,000 more than the contract fee. For the upcoming year, the CBJ has substantially increased the fixed fee.

In the case of the RLC Food Pantry, there were several factors which led to our lack of understanding as to its underfunded status:

* Changes in food distribution in Juneau during the pandemic and how food pantries were operating
* While RLC Food Pantry, pantry operations at the SE Alaska Food Bank (two afternoons a week) and Shepard of the Valley increased every aspect of their distribution (volume, selection, methods) all other food pantries went to handing out pre-made bags or boxes or closed entirely.
* How much we actually were paying over the last couple of years
* In the prior year, SE Alaska Food Bank received a grant allowing it pay for every pantry’s food bill for half a year which masked a marked increase in usage started last year.
* Changes in Juneau food pantry patrons
* With the pandemic and resulting economic upheaval, many more working patrons do not have time to go to more than one pantry a week. They were looking for a larger one-stop pantry like RLC or SE Alaska Food Bank.
* Changing needs of food pantry patrons
* Patrons wanted a bigger variety and one-on-one service (RLC provides).

Our overall understanding has only recently occurred, and has happened in concert with our close partner, the Southeast Alaska Food Bank. It continues to evolve and will be discussed with the other members of the Southeast Alaska Food Bank at their annual meeting in September. Additionally, discussion regarding food insecurity have been ongoing with the federal, state, city, and other social service agencies. We intend to seek fund from other sources in months and years ahead from these sources and expect our 2023 Hope-CBJ grant application to be for the RLC Food Pantry. However, we do not see more funding before the end of the year from any of these sources.

This Project

RLC is seeking assistance in upgrading the both the commercial kitchen facilities (last certified 15 years ago when used for the Catholic Community Service Day Care) and food storage. These upgrades and improvements will allow to better store and distribute food (both as a food pantry and as food service) in downtown Juneau.