

The Anniversary of New Jersey Food Pantry

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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Just before the anniversary of Tzu Chi's New Jersey food pantry, September 7, the partners in the project, United Way of North Essex, held their seasonal conference in Jing Si Hall, New Jersey and took the opportunity to visit the vegetarian food pantry. Over the past year, Tzu Chi has served 1,304 households (2,597 individuals) with vegetarian food and inspired them to devote their love to the society.

Recalling the establishment of the Tzu Chi New Jersey food pantry on September 10, 2010, the mayor of Cedar Grove, representatives from the food bank and the local press came to the news conference. That day Tzu Chi volunteers were all well-prepared and looking forward to serve the needy. However, while the pantry was filled with honored guests, there was no sign of a single care recipient. "It is probably because that the location is suburban. Let's be patient," said Mr. Donad Farrel from the food bank. Only in the second week after its establishment did the pantry receive its first care recipient.

One month later, the volunteers were encouraged by the fact that the number of care recipients had reached 35 households, which met the requirement for applying for free food supplies from the government.

Throughout the year, the working committee attended conferences of food pantries in the community and visited social workers of near counties in order to learn more and raise the profile of the Tzu Chi food pantry. As a result, more community volunteers joined the mission and there was donation of vegetables by Mr. Steven Young, a volunteer from the local fire department. With the love and effort from everyone, the Tzu Chi pantry now celebrates its first year anniversary.



Now it serves 191 households on a regular basis; in total, 1,304 households (2,597 individuals) have received help. Tzu Chi volunteers seize every opportunity to help the needy. Evelyn Torres, one of the care recipients, has donated ten dollars regularly and become a Tzu Chi member. She encourages her son to join the volunteer workshop; both volunteer in the pantry every Friday morning. Other care recipients, Mrs. Hsiao and her introvert son as well as Mr. Liu, have devoted their time to volunteering in the pantry.

The Tzu Chi food pantry operates two days a week. Every month, the volunteers receive free supplies of food, fresh vegetables and bread from the government; they occasionally purchase at their own expense or collect supplies from retail stores.

Tzu Chi volunteers, Lin Ming Chang and Li Jheng Hua, are responsible for getting the supplies

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from the food bank every week. Fresh vegetables and bread are the favorites with the care recipients, while the vegetable scraps are not wasted by volunteer Tsai Chi Chong. Mr. Tsai treasures each leaf and uses the scraps to make compost.

According to official regulations, supplies from the bank cannot be distributed to unqualified recipients; if so, its license will be canceled. Therefore, it is important to monitor the inventory. At first, the pantry volunteers struggled with the surplus of fresh vegetables; but they have resolved the problem by giving leftover food to Real House, a women protection institute.

To celebrate the anniversary, representatives from three food pantries -- United Way, Human Needs and Tonis Kitchen -- came to the facility. The director of Tzu Chi New Jersey, Lu Rong Lin, prepared a set of re-usable utensils as a surprise gift for every guest. They were delighted by the gifts and the delicious vegetarian lunch.



After the lunch, guests celebrated the anniversary and started their seasonal conference. Representatives from food pantries discussed the difficulties in running them with limited budgets and declining supplies from the food bank. They also said that Spanish translators were needed to help with the distribution.

They also exchanged opinions concerning food safety. Mrs. Deanna S. London, the representative of Human Needs, proposed to solve the problem by disqualifying recipients who did not reply to a notification after an absence of three months. Tzu Chi volunteers were grateful for the opportunity to share the experience of other pantries.

Finally, the volunteers showed the guests around the Jing Si temple and the pantry facility. They were impressed by the efficiency of Tzu Chi's computerized operation system which is different to that used in other pantries.

Tzu Chi's New Jersey food pantry is now one year old, thanks to the love and devotion of volunteers and the local communities. With unemployment rising and limited social welfare, everyone should work hard to operate the food pantry well and inspire the needy to be self-sufficient in future.