

The Holidays Start Now

Residents gathered at The Hampshire House last week for Garlands & Greens, a perennial event raising funds to decorate Beacon Hill for the holiday season.



Photos: Joe Walsh

Beacon Hill



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Local Food Pantry Seeing Huge Spike

By Joe Walsh

For a busy food pantry just footsteps away from Beacon Hill, Thanksgiving and the holiday season are bringing new attention to a startling local food insecurity problem.

The food pantry at the West End Branch Library has seen a dramatic spike in the number of residents who rely on its services in recent years, according to pantry operator Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD). Since last year, ABCD has doubled the amount of food that it orders from the Greater Boston Food Bank every month, and demand is especially high before the holidays, organization staff said.

Most of the pantry's clients are seniors, but the group also serves a growing number of families, said Maria Stella Gulla, director of ABCD's North End/West End Neighborhood Service Center. As area rents climb, she said, residents increasingly turn to ABCD for groceries, hot meals and help with public assistance programs.

"The cost of living has gone up, but their income is the same," Gulla said.

These economic trends are not unique to the West End. Family Table, a Waltham food pantry operated by Jewish Family & Children's Services, has seen inquiries increase steadily over the last decade,

according to pantry Director Bernice Behar. Demand spiked during the 2008 recession and never decreased, Behar said, as rising healthcare and housing costs continue to strain many residents' budgets.

"We continue to see demand from all sectors of the population," Behar said. "In all our communities, there's deep food insecurity."

Around the holiday season, the food pantry's needs become even more acute and noticeable, Gulla said. Fortunately, neighbors and local organizations tend to increase their donations at this time of year, sometimes giving turkeys and other seasonal goods, according to Gulla.

Beacon Hill residents have stepped up to meet this challenge, said Patricia Tully, the Beacon Hill Civic Association's executive director. The Civic Association has encouraged residents to stop by the West End Branch Library to donate food over the last month, she noted.

"I think it's important to realize that there's a community in our neighborhood that is food insecure," Tully said. "Our neighbors are very generous and have responded well to the drives that we've had."

These food donations are important, Gulla said, because they supplement the monthly

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ArcLight Theater

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ubiquity of streaming services like Netflix and a growing number of high budget cinematic productions made specifically for the small screens have driven consumers to increasingly eschew the theater in favor of their own couches. As a result, box office receipts have been steadily trending downward.

In response, cinema chains have turned to features, some might say gimmicks, like high end food options, recliners and in-theater wait staff bringing everything from popcorn to General Tso's chicken directly to your seat. The idea, says one movie house executive, is to give people an experience they can't get at home. Seaport's ShowPlace ICON spearheaded this trend in Boston, opening last year with chef-inspired popcorn and deluxe seating options with on-demand food delivery summoned with a touch screen tablet.

Into this mix steps ArcLight, which in addition to its Canal Street location currently operates 10 other theaters in California, Chicago and Washington DC.

In some regards, Boston's newest theater follows the trend of movie houses where the movie is only one of the attractions and where cinema staples are given a luxurious overhaul. Patrons enter through a tapas restaurant and cocktail lounge, with a

second bar area located two floors above. High end concessions are sourced from local vendors, the popcorn spiced with za'atar from Mamaleh's deli or Cajun seasoning from Cambridge-based Curio Spice Co.

But as competitors like ICON have brought ever more decadence into the theater itself, ArcLight has chosen to go in the opposite direction, providing what the company portrays as a purist cinema experience free from distractions. Forget food delivery and in-seat tablets at ArcLight, staff members enforce a no cellphone policy, and late entries into movies are prohibited. Popcorn bags have also been eliminated in favor of supposedly quieter cardboard tubs. Gone too are advertisements preceding films, although as many as three previews will be shown.

"We really want a kind of nostalgic experience," said ArcLight Chief Marketing Officer Vincent Szwajkowski. "We're offering something that doesn't exist in the Boston market."

ArcLight's slimmed-down screenings also reduce the time required to take in a flick. Szwajkowski says this fits better with how contemporary consumers view the movie-going experience.

"It's not just dinner and a movie," said Szwajkowski. "Now you go shopping and a movie, or go to a bookstore and a movie."

But if it's a movie and dinner at either of ArcLight's two restaurants, rest assured they won't mind that either.

recently installed a small freezer in the pantry, Gulla said, and she plans to add more refrigeration in the future. Gulla also hopes to eventually buy a van, allowing the organization to transport fresh food to seniors and others who are not mobile. As more people become reliant, the pantry has worked to cope with the added pressure, she explained.

"The need is there," Gulla said. "It's just a question of funds to maintain."

Food Pantry

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food orders that ABCD places with the Greater Boston Food Bank. Monetary donations, meanwhile, help the pantry buy a greater variety of food, including produce and ingredients for traditional ethnic dishes.

The food pantry is building out its capacity to meet surging demand. The organization

CareZONE

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engage people," said Jessie Gaeta, chief medical officer of Boston Healthcare for the Homeless, which operates the van along with Mass General Hospital and the Boston Public Health Commission. "We have a lot of people living in the shadows who don't feel like they can access care."

Half of CareZONE's patients do not receive any other healthcare services regularly, according to Gaeta. These patients rely on the van, she said, due to a fundamental contradiction in Boston's healthcare system: resources are abundant, but access is limited.

Many homeless and low-income patients have trouble navigating health insurance systems or scheduling appointments, Gaeta explained, and they can face stigma due to both housing insecurity and addiction issues.

"As it stands, people are still distrustful and struggle to access care," Gaeta said.

For that reason, CareZONE starts its approach through outreach. Its workers educate vulnerable people and distribute clean needles, the overdose-reversing drug Narcan, and other supplies meant to reduce risk.

Through these impressions, staff hope to encourage healthy habits and gain people's trust. Many people later become patients, stopping by the van to see a doctor for medical problems or routine physicals. The onboard clinicians can also prescribe drugs like Suboxone and help patients to enter an addiction treatment program.

By bringing healthcare and drug treatment to vulnerable patients, CareZONE helps to plug a gaping hole in the medical system, said Craig Regis, program manager at MGH's Kraft Center for Community Health. Some of these patients later transitioned to regular medical care.

"The hope is that we're able to provide these services with as few barriers as possible," Regis said at a community event. "As people are able to curb their use, we hope to connect people back into traditional care."

CareZONE staff acknowledge that outreach cannot solve the opioid overdose crisis on its own. Many patients need more complex treatment or longer-term addiction help, Gaeta noted, and those services can still prove difficult to access.

Instead, the team sees the van as a stopgap, providing essential care when it is needed.

"The van is meant to fill gaps," Regis said. "This is a bridge for some people to access treatment that is lifesaving, and then hopefully for many it's a pathway to better care."

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Sox Theater

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The Sox say the theater would fill an unmet need for a medium concert venue in the Greater Boston area, serving artists that are too small to fill the TD Garden but too large for a hall like the House of Blues. Friedman did not offer examples of bands that fit this model, but he says the team will work with Live Nation, its business partner and the owner of the nearby House of Blues, to identify suitable acts.

Once the venue opens, the team aims to book about 150 events per year. Some concerts could fall on the same day as a Sox game, but Friedman anticipates fewer than 20 days with conflicting events every year. On those days, the team plans to stagger start times, preventing Sox fans and concertgoers from arriving simultaneously. The theater will also host a slate of nonconcert programming, including local civic events, Friedman added.

"While the predominant use will be live music, there are some other entertainment uses that we anticipate hosting at the music hall," he said. "We think it's an important part of being in the community."

However, some Fenway locals see the theater as a budding neighborhood nuisance rather than a civic amenity. Resident Fredericka Veikley warned that a venue of its size could bring thousands of new car trips to the neighborhood and disrupt the area's limited parking infrastructure even further.

"It's going to change the nighttime dynamics of the neighborhood," Veikley said. "It's going to be a lot more people, and they're going to spread out into neighborhoods that were quieter and more residential in nature."

Friedman emphasized that the theater would serve as a small addition to a busy area, so the neighborhood's traffic dynamics are unlikely to change. The team also plans to offer about \$1.3 million in street upgrades, leaving the Ipswich Street area with new bus shelters and a wider sidewalk to accommodate theatergoers.

Still, Friedman said the Sox will work with neighbors on traffic flow, scheduling and other issues if needed.

"We don't expect that it's going to be a very significant change in the neighborhood," he said. "Once the music hall is up and running, we'll try to fine tune operations as much as we can."

Trash Pickup

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cubicle in City Hall but on streets in the South End it makes no sense."

Yet five months later, even the plan's harshest critics are giving the new trash regime largely positive reviews. Even if some issues remain, they acknowledge that the most dire concerns never materialized.

"I was probably the most skeptical person in the South End about the change to the new contractor and the new hours," said South End Forum Founder Steve Fox. "I'm still not sold on the new hours, but I am seeing a tremendous effort on the part of the contractor to clean up debris fields and a real conscientiousness that that I think is admirable."

The new start time has been successful in making trash collection more efficient and getting trash trucks off the street before peak congestion periods, according to city Chief of Streets Chris Osgood.

"In general, we are getting to the major streets like Mass Ave and Tremont Street prior to the morning rush hour," he said.

"We have seen very good results in terms of the time we get through the South End overall."

Fox says he has been pleasantly surprised by the performance of Capitol, a company that many South Enders remembered less than fondly from a previous stint as the neighborhood's trash contractor from 2004 to 2014. But both Fox and Osgood credit the company with being responsive to resident concerns and proactive in addressing messes left behind after trash collection.

While the South End's garbage nightmares have yet to come to life, Fox emphasizes that there is room for improvement. He believes more consistent pickup times at each address would make it easier for residents to plan when to bring their garbage to the curb, further reducing waste left out overnight.

"If we were able to get that kind of predictability in the system I think it would be immensely helpful," he said. "There are many people who do not want to put their trash out at night, who would much rather put it out in the morning, eliminating a lot of opportunity for scavenging, bad weather or whatever else."