

Jewish center expands kosher food pantry

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Recognizing the increasing demands of an observant Jewish community in need of help, the Jewish Community Center of the Greater Five Towns has expanded its kosher food pantry to a new storefront in Woodmere.

The Central Avenue location, which opened last month, features rows of shelves neatly lined with pasta, canned vegetables, puddings and other kosher foods.

Rina Shkolnik, executive director of the JCC, said the new storefront will allow the pantry to serve more families. The old kosher food pantry operated for more than four years from the JCC's building in Cedarhurst, in the basement - a cramped, dark location that clients could not visit on their own.



And with a client list that has nearly doubled from 85 families in 2008 to 150 families now, "we decided we cannot continue this way," Shkolnik said. "Our community was hurt with the changes in the economy," she said. "This is the right time for us to step in."

The storefront pantry, at 1012 Central Ave., is being assisted by the Five Towns Community Chest and the Eliezer Project, which helps families in financial crisis. While the pantry solely provides kosher food - items that are in accordance with Jewish ritual dietary laws - anyone of any background or religion is welcome, said Howard Foster, assistant executive director of the JCC.

"The bonus of kosher food is that anyone can eat it," Foster said. Shea Lerner, executive director of the Five Towns Community Chest, estimated that about 50 percent of the pantry's clients are not Jewish.

People in need who visit the pantry can browse the aisles and take what they need from the shelves in a manner similar to shopping in a store.

The lease runs for two years, after which Shkolnik said she hoped that the community wouldn't need such a large pantry.

Meanwhile, Long Islanders who want to donate food - kosher or not - can set nonperishable's by their mailboxes this Saturday, when the National Association of Letter Carriers and the U.S. Postal Service holds its annual food drive.

"This is a critical time for Long Islanders to give if they're able to give," said Paule Pachter, executive director of Hauppauge food bank Long Island Cares.