



PRESTON KNIGHT PHOTOS

(L-R) Administrator Jenny Meadows, Director Vickie Waldrop and Founder Sam Montanez recently celebrated the opening of Hope Distributed's expanded food pantry on Boyers Road in Rockingham County. The organization has a goal of serving 8,000 people a month within five years.

DISTRIBUTING HOPE, *One Meal at a Time*

by Preston Knight, SVEC Writer

Around the shelves of Hope Distributed, the buzzwords are dignity and respect.

Founder Sam Montanez said people who visit the nonprofit organization deserve to be treated with both of those, or else the mission of the organization falls short.

“Just because somebody is down and out and life’s been really hard for them doesn’t mean we cannot have a place where they feel like they matter, and to show we really care,” he said during a recent tour of Hope Distributed’s expanded food pantry.

The facility, at 1869 Boyers Road east of Harrisonburg, serves more than 2,000 people in need each month. Hope Distributed also provides household items through its Homes to Homes furniture store and warehouse and free clothing store — it gave away more than 47,000 outfits in 2017 — out of its former location on the same property, alongside Harrisonburg First Church of the Nazarene. Montanez is one of the church’s pastors and leads its missional and Hispanic ministries.

The new 6,000-square-foot food pantry, which opened in February, is three times larger than the previous one and designed to accommodate future growth. This is tied to Hope Distributed’s five-year goal of serving 8,000 people a month, equal to 30 percent of those in the poverty level in Rockingham County and surrounding areas.

While Harrisonburg and Rockingham County residents are the primary beneficiaries of the organization’s generosity, the facility is open to anyone

who meets a certain income threshold. A photo ID is required.

People are allowed to visit the food pantry once a month and shop for themselves, with a few limitations on some items. Before the new facility opened, volunteers and the three part-time staffers at Hope Distributed would box groceries in advance. Too often, there were unwanted foods included.

While a monthly shopping spree will likely not provide enough food for a family until they visit again, it at least offers some savings for people living on low incomes, Administrator Jenny Meadows said. In other words, it distributes hope to them.

“When we opened in October 2004, we served 12 people that day. We’ve come a long way since then,” Director Vickie Waldrop said. “It’s just amazing to me to see the number of people we get.”

Hope Distributed is the largest food pantry in Rockingham County in the Verona-based Blue Ridge Area Food Bank system. The food bank is one of Hope Distributed’s funding sources, along with Feeding America, the Houff Family Foundation, Hartman Foundation, Steiner Foundation and multiple local individual donors.

Through partnerships with the food bank, Walmart, Food Lion and Costco, among others, Hope Distributed maintains fully stocked shelves and packed refrigerator and freezer space. More than 500,000 pounds of food are distributed a year.

To fulfill its mission, Hope Distributed relies on a network of more than 150 volunteers, plus college groups, companies and others that periodically dedicate time to serve. This includes not only the regular food pantry, but also Hope on Wheels — its mobile food pantry that makes a



monthly distribution of food to individuals who can’t get to the physical food pantry — and Hope for Kids, a school pantry program that provides boxes of food for children and their families during the winter holiday.

Waldrop said there is a seasonal uptick in people who visit Hope Distributed over the summer because school is not in session. But, she adds, every month brings different people whose circumstances may lead to temporary financial hardships that affect their access to food.

The visitors are a cross-section of society, Waldrop said, and it’s important to remember that it does not take much for a series of events to occur that could lead a person to the food pantry’s doorstep.

Anyone who can donate time or money to help Hope Distributed fulfill its goals is welcome, said Anne-Marie Wenger, a member of its board of directors and lead volunteer.

“The need is real,” she said. “Hunger is not just a Hope Distributed issue. Hunger is an issue for all of us.”

The Hope Distributed food pantry is open to the public the first Thursday of the month from 9:30-11:30 a.m., every Thursday from 4-6 p.m. and the first, second and third Saturday of each month from 9-11 a.m. For more information, visit hopedistributed.org or call (540) 578-3510.