

Attention to Healthy Food Gets Thanks

MEND's effort over the past two years to increase its focus on distributing fresh and healthy food has not gone unnoticed by patrons at its 17 partner pantries. Denise, a MEND client through the pantry at New Hope Baptist Church of East Orange, is among the many who are appreciative.

MEND, working with the New Jersey Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, updated its food drive materials to emphasize the donation of healthier food items, such as peanut butter, whole-wheat pasta, and oatmeal. MEND's new mobile food pantry, a converted school bus known as *The Green Bean*, will also begin supplementing the traditional food pantry packages patrons receive with fresh produce and other healthy foods. Denise, one of the MEND food pantry patrons, welcomes the effort. "I'm happy that the food [pantry] gives out healthy food," she said. "The things I get are very nutritious. I get low-salt mixed veggies. I have high blood pressure, so it really, really helps."

Denise relies almost exclusively on New Hope Baptist Church food pantry, and a handful of other pantries, to meet her food needs. "I eat whatever the food pantry gives me," she said. Denise also receives \$15 a month from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps), which she uses to buy small packages of proteins, including ground turkey, canned salmon and low-sodium bacon. "It goes fast!" she noted. "Fifteen dollars is not a lot."



Money has gotten tighter for Denise (who lives off a monthly disability check) since the rent on her senior citizen housing increased from 30% of her income to 40%, she said. In addition, she needs to either buy a new car or fix her old one, which is in need of repair.

Until her car situation gets resolved, Denise will limit her food pantry visits to one closer to the senior citizen day program she attends. In the meantime, she remains upbeat, counting her blessings, not her troubles. Every Thanksgiving she sends thank-you cards to all the managers and volunteers at the pantries. "The food [pantries] help me out tremendously," she said. "I thank them for the open door."