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Open Pantry Community Services' People's Center thrift store in Springfield helps provide clothing, household items for needy



Laurie Bachand, supervisor-manager of the People's Center on State Street. At left is volunteer Myrna Perez. *(Michael S. Gordon / The Republican)*

By Kathryn Roy | Special to The Republican
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SPRINGFIELD - Open Pantry Community Services isn't just about providing food to the hungry. Open Pantry also runs the **People's Center**, a thrift store which provides low income residents with much needed clothing and household items.

The People's Center, located at 287 State St., has been operated by Open Pantry for almost five years. It was previously run in collaboration with the Pioneer Valley chapter of the American Red Cross.

Financial constraints recently prompted Open Pantry to seek small donations for items purchased at the People's Center.

“Due to funding cuts, we now charge \$2 a bag,” she said. “People can come in and receive a grocery-sized bag and fill it up for \$2. If they're homeless and don't have income, we waive the fee.”

The People's Center currently has no outside funding, and relies solely on donations to help pay for its operations and one part-time employee. The center also is staffed by several volunteers, who spend time sorting, folding and organizing clothing, along with greeting and assisting customers.

“The \$2 helps us to sustain the program,” she said. “Funding for this type of program is very limited, but it's important because it fits with our mission of providing basic needs – food, clothing and shelter.”

The People's Center has a partnership with Red Wing Shoes on Boston Road.

“We pick up used shoes from them,” Maynard said. “Sometimes there are work boots in there. It's wonderful because we're able to provide people with the items they need for work.”

The People's Center has many faithful donors who drop off items regularly. They also have small household items and baby care items, such as high chairs and exersaucers.

“We accept those items and give them out as needed,” Maynard said.

While all types of clothing are welcome, men's clothing in particular is always in high demand. Baby clothes are also needed.

“We appreciate if donations are seasonally appropriate, because our space is limited for storage, but we will accept anything at any time,” Maynard said.

The center also accepts school uniforms, which are given out for free to needy families. In fall and winter, hats, gloves and coats are appreciated.

“Those go quickly,” Maynard said. “We’ll even accept blankets and sleeping bags, which we give out to people who are homeless as well.”

The center often serves people recently out of incarceration, who are without clothes for work or to go on a job interview. The center’s work boots, khakis and polo shirts come in handy for them.

The population served by the People’s Center is generally at or below the poverty line.

“Our unduplicated count (of people served) is around 2,000 a year,” Maynard said.

“Many people come back multiple times throughout the year.”

Those wishing to make a donation directly to the People’s Center can write a check to Open Pantry Community Services, with a note that the donation be directed to the People’s Center, and send to P.O. Box 5127, Springfield, MA 01101-5127. Donations of clothing can also be dropped off at the center, at 287 State St. weekdays between 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The People’s Center is open to the public weekdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.