

Mercy's Mav Market Tackles Mounting Food Insecurity

Food insecurity, defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food to support an active, healthy life, affects about one in nine Americans. According to a report by Feeding Westchester, evidence is mounting that college students make up a growing percentage of the number of food insecure Americans. A study by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some 60% of college students were affected by job loss or were having difficulty obtaining food, water or housing.

Students who do not get enough healthy food often suffer adverse effects, not only to their health and well-being but also to their academic success. Without enough to eat students tend to miss more classes, have lower test scores and have a greater risk of dropping out before graduation.

In 2017, Mercy College set out to fight food insecurity by opening the first Mav Market Food Pantry and Resource Center (Mav Market) on the Bronx Campus. Spearheaded by Felipe Henao, former assistant dean of student affairs, and Hannah Berling, a student life specialist in Student Affairs at the Manhattan Campus, the program is helping to address food insecurity on Mercy's three campuses.

Described as "Mercy's food and resource pantry," the Mav Market distributes fresh and nonperishable food, snacks, toiletries and baby supplies to registered members, helps them apply for state and federal support programs, and offers advice on healthy meal planning. According to Julie Cruickshank, Mav Market program coordinator and AmeriCorps VISTA member, the program serves over 800 registered members and has distributed over 33,000 meals to the Mercy community since its inception.

Confidentiality and sensitivity to the needs of its patrons are guiding principles of the Mav Market.



Jade Ales '22, Associate Director of Student Life Jason Gloe and Karleyn Paulino Ferreira '22

The staff are highly attuned to recognizing when someone may need food assistance, using multiple communication channels to let students know that help is available. This year, new student orientation included a series of messages to alert students to the facts about hunger — and the solutions available through the Mav Market. "It was the first time we were able to target every single student," said Berling.

The team also works with Mercy's PACT mentors to help identify if a student might not be getting enough to eat. "Students don't usually self-identify as being food insecure," adds Cruickshank. "But during a meeting with their PACT mentor, they might say they feel tired all the time, or they're so stressed out financially they can't concentrate in class." Mentors are trained to gently suggest that hunger may be causing some of their stress and point the student toward the Mav Market.

"Part of our mission is to provide an open, inclusive environment where students feel comfortable," said Henao.

"Our staff is committed to maintaining not just the confidentiality but also honoring the dignity of every member." Cruickshank concurred. "The Mav Market is a judgment-free space that honors the needs of everyone who comes in the door," she said. "We hope our members feel right away that this is a community."

The Mav Market relies on fundraising, grant efforts, Feeding Westchester, Food Bank for New York City and City Harvest to keep the three campus pantries stocked. "We have an Amazon wish list of items we can't get through grants or our food suppliers," said Berling. "A donor can order items or Amazon Fresh gift cards that we distribute to patrons." But even these efforts can fall short. "We're always looking for more ways to fill the gaps."

That's where Mercy's administrative departments come in. "We work closely with the Institutional



Advancement teams. We meet regularly with these teams and discuss our needs, goals and ways we can collaborate,” said Berling. Often donors will fund initiatives like the Amazon Fresh cards. In the fall, a successful appeal was made to faculty, staff and alumni to support the Mav Market on Giving Tuesday. “We raised more than \$15,000, an unprecedented response,” said Berling. “We’re so grateful that the community values what we do, because it literally changes lives.”

During the months that Mercy campuses and pantries were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Berling and Cruickshank created a food bag ordering system. Food items were packed and labeled for curbside pickup on an assigned day. The walk-in pantries at all locations have since reopened to in-person traffic, requiring members to wear masks and shop during specific days and hours.

Cruickshank is passionate about filling this basic need. “It’s not just about serving meals, it’s about providing students with the tools to succeed,” she said. “If you’re hungry and just need a snack to get you through until your next meal, the Mav Market can provide it. As our website says, ‘A granola bar could be the difference between a B and an A.’”

For more information about the Mav Market or to make a donation visit: mercy.edu/campus-life/mav-market



Mia Barksdale '21

Notes of Thanks

During the early days of the pandemic, it was all but impossible to order groceries online. People were fearful of contracting the virus if they entered a supermarket to shop. Donations from individual donors helped fund the purchase of 200 Amazon Fresh gift cards to be distributed to members.

Below are some of the dozens of emails thanking the Mav Market for its support and offering a poignant insight into the experience of food insecurity.

“My family is ineligible for food stamps and other government assistance so with the ... generosity of the Advancement team and especially the Mav Market, I can help ease some of the stress about the food insecurity I constantly face.”

“During this pandemic it has been very hectic and without the Mav Market it has become somewhat difficult to make ends meet. The opportunity for this gift card is a Godsend. It will allow me some breathing room and help my family immensely.”

“Thank you very much. This money will go a long way for me. It has been a real struggle. I am currently going through chemotherapy, which makes me even more vulnerable to this virus.”