

# Howard County Food Bank Celebrates Much-Needed Expansion

Even though Debbie Gomez was working, her family lost its apartment and car when her husband was laid off from his job two years ago. Throughout the family's crisis, there was one bright spot – thanks to free groceries from the Howard County Food Bank and food stamps, Debbie, her husband, their two children, and Debbie's mother who lives with them had enough to eat.

"My family has been praying, 'thank you, God' for giving us this food," said Debbie. Four months ago, her husband got a job, but their income is still so low the family continues to rely on the Food Bank.

Debbie is one of the 12,000 Howard County residents who took 300,000 pounds of groceries from the Food Bank last year. That's double the Food Bank distribution from previous years. The high demand for the Food Bank's services led the Community Action Council of Howard County (CAC), which oversees the Food Bank, to double the facility's size. The renovation also brought the Food Bank into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The State Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) provided all the funding for the renovation through stimulus grants.

The expansion was completed in May, and an Open House to celebrate and inform the public about the Food Bank was held July 28<sup>th</sup>. A banner listing organizations that were especially helpful with the renovation hung outside the Food Bank where the ceremony and ribbon-cutting were held. They were DHCD, Howard County Government, Columbia Foundation, Columbia Patuxent Rotary Club, and St. John Baptist Church.

"In today's world, even people of moderate means have to utilize facilities like this one that you provide," State Sen. Ed Kasemeyer told the 70 people who attended the Open House.

CAC President Bita Dayhoff, Vice Chairperson of the Howard County Council Mary Kay Sigaty, Howard County Department of Citizen Services Director Lois Mikkila, and DHCD Director Reginald Stanfield also gave brief remarks supporting the Food Bank. After their comments, Ms. Dayhoff, several of CAC's Board members, partners and volunteers, as well as elected officials gathered in front of Food Bank's doors for the ribbon-cutting. Armed with gold scissors, the ribbon was snipped.

A tour of the renovated facility followed. Participants saw cereal boxes, canned goods, laundry detergent, and diapers neatly lining black shelves along with milk, chicken and produce behind see-through refrigerator doors. Items were divided into labeled sections such as protein, dairy, and grain.

“It’s well organized, impressive, and very appealing,” said Executive Director of the Columbia Housing Corporation Grace Morris. “It’s like a little grocery store. People will want to come here.”

In the rear of the Food Bank, a warehouse stored overflow items.

Earlier this year, CAC made another major improvement to the Food Bank by acquiring five plots at the Long Reach Community Garden in Columbia. All of the produce from the plots (700 pounds as of late July) is given to the Food Bank. The harvest has produced tomatoes, cantaloupes, watermelons, peppers, radishes, and eggplants. “It has been more successful than we could have imagined,” said Ms. Dayhoff.

“Fresh produce goes off the shelves quickly,” said Food Bank Coordinator Yolanda Sykes.

A fall crop that will include kale, spinach, cabbage, sweet potatoes, turnips, and onions will be planted at the end of August. CAC volunteers maintain the garden.

Many of the items in the Food Bank are donated by individuals and organizations. In addition, individuals and organizations donate money which is used to purchase food, primarily from the Maryland Food Bank.

The Food Bank supplies nine food pantries in Howard County. The Food Bank also handles the Temporary Emergency Assistance Program, a federal government program monitored by the state. Three times a year, TEAP gives huge amounts of foods to the five participating food pantries in Howard County. This program requires the Food Bank to inspect participating pantries for compliance with regulations.

Low-income families may shop at the Food Bank once a month, pick out their own items, and load them into shopping carts that are provided. At the checkout line, items are weighed on a floor scale. To keep supplies from running out, limits are put on the number of items shoppers may take. The limits are based on the type of food taken, number of people in a household, and the season of the year (less food is available in the summer when donations are lower).

In addition to the Food Bank, CAC administers Howard County’s Head Start program, assists income-eligible Howard County residents with energy and housing, and is the lead agency for the North Laurel-Savage Multiservice Center.

*The Howard County Food Bank is located at 8920 Route 108 in Columbia. It is open Mondays 1 to 6 p.m., and Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1 to 4 p.m. Call the Food Bank at 410-313-6185 to donate food. To donate money, send checks marked Food Bank donation to CAC, 6751 Columbia Gateway Drive, Columbia, MD 21046. Money and food donations are tax deductible. Volunteers are needed to help with the community garden. To volunteer, call Donna Stinchcomb or Frances Handy at 410-313-6440. CAC’s website is [www.cac-hc.org](http://www.cac-hc.org).*