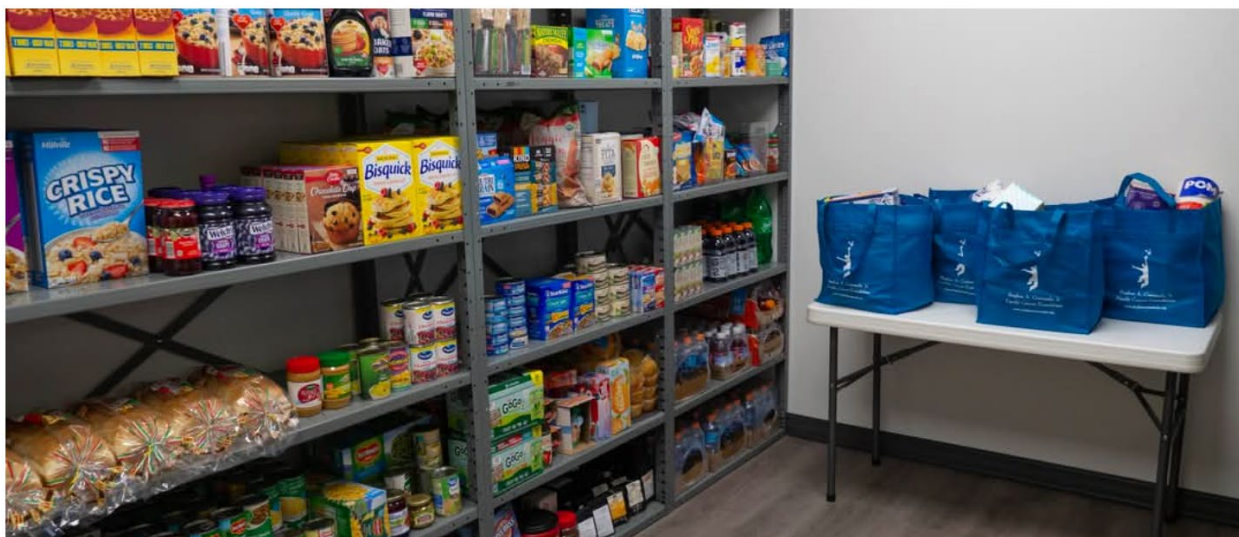


Bridging the Gap of Food Insecurity in Cancer Patients



An interview with Sarah Vojtek, President & CEO of Stewart's Caring Place

Colleen Iacianci (CI): Thanks so much for joining me today to talk about the Comunale Cancer Foundation Food Pantry at Stewart's Caring Place (SCP) in Fairlawn! This is such an important topic to the foundation as basic needs often become overlooked when an individual is facing the overwhelming feeling of a cancer diagnosis or treatment plan. So, I'd first like to ask who typically visits the food pantry at SCP?

Sarah Vojtek (SV): Thank you Colleen for the opportunity to share more on this topic. The food pantry at SCP is primarily used by individuals and families impacted by a cancer diagnosis. These participants often face financial burdens due to medical expenses and may struggle to afford essential groceries. Additionally, there is a mental burden associated with making a list and going to the grocery store. Sometimes, individuals can't leave the house, or a caregiver may not have the ability to go to the store. Our food pantry is a convenient option if someone is already in the building for a program or service.

CI: So how would your participants find out about the pantry and what it can offer them?

SV: Participants typically find out about the food pantry through referrals from healthcare providers, social workers, and community outreach programs. Information is also available on Stewart's Caring Place's website. Our staff mentions it on every tour and to every new participant they come in contact with.

CI: Can anyone utilize the food pantry, even without a referral?

SV: Our food pantry is open to those affected by cancer. People are welcome to call or stop in for additional questions as well. Our volunteers and staff are eager to provide support.

CI: That's wonderful Sarah, thank you. Can you share a bit more about food insecurity, specifically, can it disproportionately affect the population SCP serves?

SV: Yes, food insecurity significantly affects the population we serve. Many individuals with a cancer diagnosis experience financial strain, which can lead to difficulty in accessing food. Having an onsite food pantry provides immediate access to food, alleviating some of the financial and mental stress associated with a cancer diagnosis.

CI: How often do you see the food pantry utilized?

SV: The food pantry turns over every 7-10 days as many participants rely on it for their monthly groceries. The demand is consistent, reflecting the ongoing need for food assistance among our community. Our volunteers assemble grocery bags for quick and easy distribution and can customize them a bit as needed for the participant.

CI: What sorts of items within the food pantry are most needed for those with a cancer diagnosis?

SV: Items most needed for those with a cancer diagnosis include those high in protein and shelf-stable. Staples such as black beans, nutrition shakes (Ensure, PediaSure, or Boost), peanut butter, soup, rice, and canned tuna are particularly beneficial. Snack items such as saltine crackers, granola or fruit & grain bars, and oatmeal are often sought after as well.

CI: In addition to the grocery bags you mentioned, are there supplemental programs SCP utilize the pantry for?

SV: Yes, the food pantry supports various supplemental programs, including nutrition education workshops and cooking classes. Additionally, we provide boxes filled with ingredients for Thanksgiving dinner the week prior to the holiday. Individuals and families can stock up on food needed to have a wonderful holiday meal and enough food to get them through the Thanksgiving week.

CI: That sounds like such a comfort to your participants, to reinstate a sense of normalcy during such a difficult time. So, how can others help? Can food be donated to the food pantry at Stewart's Caring Place?

SV: Yes, we always appreciate donations of shelf-stable, non-outdated items. The items I just mentioned are the most in demand and can be dropped off at our Fairlawn campus.

CI: Sarah, thank you so much again for sharing this time with me to discuss the food pantry at SCP.

SV: Thank you Colleen for the opportunity to share more. SCP is committed to supporting our participants through comprehensive services. Our food pantry is just one aspect of our holistic approach to cancer care, ensuring that individuals and families have access to the resources they need during their cancer journey. We are deeply appreciative of the continued support from our community, particularly the generosity of the Comunale Cancer Foundation, which ensures that no one impacted by a cancer journey in our community goes hungry.

