

Community Pantry's new leadership: Alice Perez aims to increase FOOD distribution

Written by By Melinda Russell Sun Correspondent
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Alice Perez will officially take over as director of the Jim Harlin Community Pantry on June 1. She hopes that with a “combination of passion, a great team to work with and community support it can turn into one of the best pantries in the state.”

A 35 year resident of Gallup, Perez and her husband, Max, have raised four children here. They have four grandchildren and one on the way.

Perez takes over a pantry that was started in 1999. The pantry has had its challenges, but has a strong foundation. With only nine employees, seven of whom are part time, the food pantry contributes to the needs of over 3,000 individuals or families each month. It depends on volunteers and the dedication of their employees to get the job done.

Perez would like to see revenues increase so they can service another 3,000 needy families in the area and so her staff can become full time employees. Perez has worked in community service jobs most of her adult life. She has worked as a UNM Program Coordinator, secretary at the schools in Gallup, and most recently as a secretary for the Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce.

“Every position I’ve ever held has been a community-based position,” Perez said. She added jokingly, “I don’t see any reason to change that at this point in my life.”

Perez worked with many non-profit organizations and special events while employed with the chamber of commerce. She started as secretary, moved into administrative assistant, was promoted to Vice President, COO, and then was moved into the position of office director when new chamber director David Hinkle was hired.

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While working for the chamber, Perez completed courses through the Institute of Organizational Management. Perez says the school is a four-year program that basically teaches you how to run a non-profit organization.

When asked why she decided to make the move, Perez responded, "I went into it (the new administration) with enthusiasm and the ability to work for somebody else. But I saw my vision changing. When I saw my vision was not on track, I knew it was time for a change."

Perez became a member of the pantry's board of directors in January. In February she learned that Tim Kelly, the current director, would be stepping down. She says she started investigating the job at that point.

"I investigated the position prior to applying for it," she said. "At that point, I knew it could go nowhere but up."

When she takes her position on Monday, Perez will sit down with her staff and start the process of looking forward. "There are ways that we can reach out to more people, both clients and donors," Perez said. "My passion for the community is what inspired me to become involved with the pantry."

The pantry is a multi-layered organization.

The staff is passionate about their responsibility to their clients. Hilda Kendall has been working for the pantry for 10 years. She says some of the greatest things she has seen is when families are able to get on their feet and no longer need the services the pantry provides.

"I love my job," she said. "It's about the people in the community. Someone might not see, know or understand why people are in need – we know."

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The staff sees many of their clients who have moved away from the system express their gratitude for the help they received from the pantry. Kendall explained, a lot of people come back to volunteer, some even send donations with thank you letters. Our clients want to work. Many times, when they finally get jobs, they give back.

The pantry has a data base that gives the pantry information about their clients and helps them serve the needs better. Not only does the data base help to prevent fraud and misuse of the system, but it also helps the staff procure the right resources for the people they are serving.

Kendall explained some of the special programs offered by the pantry at this time.

EMERGENCY BOXES

With a referral, from another agency such as Casa San Martine, Work Force Solutions, or Catholic Charities, a family or individual can receive a 25 pound box of dry goods to help them get back on their feet. Emergency circumstances might include unexpected vehicle repairs or medical costs.

FRESH PRODUCE

Clients can pick up fresh produce every week between Tuesday and Friday. The produce distribution does not have an income base requirement. This program is designed to encourage a healthier lifestyle for all the pantry clients.

SENIOR CITIZENS

Many of the senior citizens taking advantage of the food pantry are on a fixed income. Many of them are on disability. Kendall explained that those on disability may be living on less than \$800 per month. They have to pay rent, utilities and medical bills with that check. Most of their clients also receive food stamps but those benefits are minimal. To prevent them from having to

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choose between food and medication, the food pantry steps in.

Another problem the pantry is seeing is grandparents, who are on a tight budget, suddenly needing to raise their grandchildren. These grandparents can't send their grandchildren away, so the need for assistance becomes even greater.

VETERANS

If they qualify, the food pantry gives veterans a commodity box and fresh produce. They also supply Thanksgiving turkeys for them.

FOOD FOR KIDS

This is the elementary school backpack program that sends healthy foods home with children on the weekends. Many of these children live with parents who work multiple jobs. The foods that are sent with them are healthy, easy to open and need no preparation. Many times these students don't get a meal on the weekend. The only meals they eat are the ones prepared by the schools. Unfortunately, there is no program that helps these children in the summer.

Currently, there are 20 elementary schools taking advantage of this program. Each school is allowed to refer 24 students to receive the backpacks. The cost of the program is \$3,500 per school, per year. Schools are responsible for picking up their food items from the pantry and packing the backpacks.

The holiday breaks are always a concern for the pantry. The Gallup Lions Club has pitched in to buy extra food items to help students get through the Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks.

Other special programs include the Baskets of Brotherhood that is sponsored by the Gallup Rotary Club. In November, the Rotary Club fills boxes at the pantry with supplies needed to make a special Thanksgiving meal. These boxes are distributed to pantry clients.

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Donations for the pantry come from across the United States. Americans for Native Americans, based in Doylestown, PA and Meals From The Heartland in Des Moines, IA are some of the pantry's largest contributors. There are local businesses and organizations that also donate to the pantry and all those donations are appreciated.

One of the problems the pantry faces is that people are willing to donate food, but they don't donate a lot of money. Overhead is expensive: salaries, utilities and building upkeep. Kendall explained the roof of the pantry is in need of repair or replacement. At this time, there are no funds to help with that problem.

During a tour of the grounds, Perez observed and listened to the pantry employees. Each person was confident in their job and knowledgeable about how they fit into the system. Perez says her goal is "to take something good and make it 10 times better."