News
Ministry



Sr. Bonnie McMenamin, a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia and director of the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey, shows the bags of Brussels sprouts the center is preparing to hand out as part of its monthly food distribution day, March 20. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

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It's not yet 10 a.m., but the sidewalk outside the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center in the Cramer Hill neighborhood here is busy with volunteers unloading and sorting food and residents asking where to line up to receive it when it's ready.

Distribution won't begin for at least another hour, but people have been lining up since 7 a.m. waiting to register and go through the food line. It's a chilly March morning, so today they're waiting inside the Christus Lutheran Church next door, where around 60 people are sitting in the pews.

By 5 p.m., more than 350 people will have been given a month's worth of food for their family. There is so much food and so many people that they set up the distribution line on the sidewalk instead of hauling it inside.

"We assist them anyway we can," said Sr. Bonnie McMenamin, director of the center, which celebrated its fifth anniversary June 1.



Volunteers fill bags and carts with food during the SSJ Neighborhood Center's monthly food distribution day, March 20 in Camden, New Jersey. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

That assistance, through volunteers and partnerships with other agencies, is wide-ranging: There are English as a second language classes, community garden beds, the food pantry, financial assistance to prevent utility shut-offs, a clothes closet, a diaper bank, classes for new mothers, vision screening, and assistance getting a New Jersey driver's license.

Groups of Boy Scouts, families, nearby parishes, a nearby Methodist church, Sisters of St. Joseph associates and sisters from other congregations — even a Ukrainian Orthodox sister — all pitch in. Today, a group of boys from St. Joseph's Preparatory School, a Jesuit boys' school in Philadelphia, are helping unload the truck full of food and sort it into portions for distribution. Up to a dozen boys come every month to help with distribution day. In addition to McMenamin, St. Joseph Sisters Clarisa Vázquez and Mary Berryman work at the center.

The center occupies a renovated building that was once a Lutheran school attached to Christus Lutheran church. Christus may have a small congregation but thanks to the neighborhood center, its building is filled with volunteers and neighbors being helped.

Among myriad services, the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center offers a monthly food pantry to hundreds of residents in Camden, New Jersey.

"This is probably one of the few Lutheran-Catholic partnerships any of us know about," said Christus pastor, the Rev. Jesse Brown. "This," he said, gesturing to the bustling building, "has been put back to life."

Stan Thompson began volunteering about four years ago and is a member of the center's advisory board. He was a project manager at Bristol Myers Squibb until he retired in December and answered questions as he carried boxes of food from the truck to be unpacked and handed out.

"The sisters have things so well organized," he said. "It's just rewarding — I come home so much more tired, but it's so much better."

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Sr. Liz McGill, a novice with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, unpacks apples to hand out during the SSJ Neighborhood Center's monthly food distribution day, March 20 in Camden, New Jersey. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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The Rev. Jesse Brown, pastor of Christus Lutheran Church in Camden, New Jersey, speaks with SSJ Neighborhood Center director Sr. Bonnie McMenamin during the center's monthly food distribution day on March 20. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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Volunteers register neighbors to go through the food line at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey, during the center's monthly food distribution day on March 20. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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Neighbors wait inside Christus Lutheran Church's sanctuary for the SSJ Neighborhood Center's monthly food distribution to start, on March 20 in Camden, New Jersey. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



Sr. Bonnie McMenamin (left), a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia and director of the SSJ Neighborhood Center, hugs Bea Russell, the center's advisory board vice president, during the center's monthly food distribution day, March 20. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

The need here is crushing — four in 10 residents here have less than a high school diploma, and McMenamin estimates nine out of 10 are undocumented and thus ineligible for any government assistance. The median income for Camden is $36,258, less than half the national figure.

"People are one job loss away from being hungry. They're living meal to meal," Thompson says.

Board vice president Bea Russell is also here, unpacking boxes. She was chief operating officer at Cathedral Kitchen, a large nonprofit in Camden. She said she loves the way sisters can just get things done.

"They network with people who want to do something," Russell said. "And then there's no bureaucracy, it just goes right to the people."



Neighbors prepare to take carts full of food home at the SSJ Neighborhood Center's monthly food distribution day, March 20 in Camden, New Jersey. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

At last, the truck is unloaded and food unpacked to the point where distribution can begin. People begin walking from the church sanctuary, down a flight of steps to the sidewalk where they are met by a volunteer with a cart or wagon, then move down the line, filling it with bags of apples, Brussels sprouts, grapefruit, meat, eggs, bread and juice. At the end of the line is one of the St. Joseph's Prep students, who can help them get the overladen cart home and then return it to be used again.

It seems like a lot of food, but it is provisions for a month, and includes many items, like fresh produce, they might not be able to buy at all, even if they could afford it.

"This is really a food desert," McMenamin said. "We have very few big supermarkets around. We have little bodegas, but they are very expensive for our neighbors."

The center's ZIP code officially has a 9.1% unemployment rate — more than double the national average — but that only accounts for people in the workforce, and undocumented people are not legally able to work so they are not included. Many do work under the table, McMenamin said, but the work is sporadic and leaves them vulnerable to abuse.

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"Most of our neighbors don't have full-time jobs or anything, so it's a real challenge for them," McMenamin said.

Another challenge is change: Most of the center's neighbors are from the Dominican Republic, and there are many Spanish speakers on the staff. But lately there have been more immigrants from Haiti, and there isn't anyone who speaks French or Creole.

But things are organized and run smoothly. Vázquez said that's due to Berryman's former career as a teacher.

"She's very organized," Vázquez said. "It makes it very easy for volunteers to get involved."