



Jean Kelly, executive director of the Mary Brennan Interfaith Nutrition Network, says clients will now be able to choose their food.

# SOUPING UP THE PANTRY

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For years, the Mary Brennan Interfaith Nutrition Network soup kitchen in Hempstead gave each of its hungry guests a pre-packed bag of groceries to tide them over the weekend, when it was closed.

Yesterday, in a ceremony for the kitchen's 10th anniversary, executive director Jean Kelly announced a change: henceforth, clients will choose their own food, browsing the aisles of a newly built pantry and filling bags on their own. The change might seem small, but for Kelly it proclaims a philosophy.

"People who come here can feel as normal as anyone else," she said. "It's a supermarket, except there's no cash register."

The new pantry's shelves were laden with bags of rice and

cans of tuna, its coolers stocked with juice and vegetables. A \$100,000 grant from the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock paid for its construction and should fund half a year's worth of food, Kelly said.

She listed other recent improvements to the building, a cavernous former women's hair products factory the group converted into what it says is Long Island's largest soup kitchen: seven bathrooms, two of them with guest showers; offices for social workers to meet privately with clients; a brightly colored art lounge for the volunteers who prepare and serve food, some on six-hour shifts. There's room inside for 200 people to sit and eat, and the entrance features a new, blue awning "to show that there are blue skies out there for everybody who's sometimes walking in clouds"

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and, in a pinch, "protect people from the rain," Kelly said.

The group does not ask the people it feeds for proof of residence or need, as Kelly said some groups do; nor does it make them available for newspaper interviews, a policy Kelly said is intended to protect their dignity and privacy.

But there were others among the crowd of about 60 at yesterday's gathering who are familiar with the group's work. Among them was Nassau County Department of Social Services commissioner John E. Imhof,

who said the group was "one of the greatest beacons of hope for those who are hungry and homeless" in the county.

Almost 60,000 Nassau residents are receiving food stamps, with more applications coming in and numbers swelling in Suffolk County as well, he said, a strong indicator of demand for the group's work. "Gas is up, housing is up, food costs more," he said. "As I see it, we're still struggling," he said.

Then there were Debra Stolzenberg of Wantagh and Linda Goldstein of North Bellmore, retired teachers who volunteer every Monday. Goldstein's beat is coffee; Stolzenberg's is cleanup and laundry. "When I leave here in the afternoon, I feel like I've had a workout," Stolzenberg said. "I'm tired, I'm wet, and I'm feeling good."