

For more than 17 years Esther's Pantry has been meeting the special food needs of those with AIDS in the Portland metropolitan area. Contrary to some rumors that have been floating around the region, the folks who run the program insist it will not be closing down and will be around for many years to come.

The misinformation started spreading after word was received that Esther's Pantry was facing a new financial challenge. That, indeed, is true. But according to director David Beckley and coordinator Gregg Curé, there is absolutely no way the program will shut down.

According to Beckley, those who run Esther's Pantry always have had to raise half of the \$80,000 yearly budget as part of a matching grant they received from the federal government through Title I of the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act. Unfortunately, funding increases have not kept up with the growing needs of those with HIV/AIDS.

Cuts have been made and restrictions have been placed on what organizations are financed. This year, according to Beckley, the latest round of reductions hit emergency food box programs.

That means charities like Esther's Pantry, which received between \$40,000 and \$42,000 a year in Ryan White funds, will receive nothing. Now, instead of having to raise half of the budget, the organization will have to raise it all. It will not be easy, but Beckley is optimistic that supporters of the program, especially those in the sexual minorities community, will come through.

"We have sufficient cash reserves to last at least two years," he says. "Of course, we don't want to alleviate that. The board of directors is looking at other grant sources, and we have added a grant writer to the board. But we will be depending on the GLBT community, as well as others in the area, to hopefully increase their donations."

Beckley and Curé say they already have received a great response from gay bars, including the Eagle PDX, the Fox & Hounds, C.C. Slaughters and Silverado, all of which have held some sort of fund-raising activity to support Esther's Pantry.

The program was created in 1985 and named in honor of Chester "Esther" Brinker, one of the first people in Portland to die of complications from AIDS. It originally ran independently, but in March 2000 the governing board transferred its operation and full oversight to Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, which employs both Beckley and Curé. "The church has fully committed itself to ensuring not only the continuation of the pantry but its expansion into communities of color that are

## BARE PANTRY?

### AIDS charity survives federal funding cuts

by Tom Stevenson



Esther's Pantry board members Bill Elmore (left) and Andrew Wilder stock the shelves

now being ravaged by AIDS," according to a program brochure.

Since Esther's Pantry was taken over by the church, organizers have been able to save money by cutting back on things like administrative costs. But the church did keep in place an advisory board that oversees the program and that reports to the MCC board. In addition, Esther's Pantry continues to be maintained as a separate entity.

The program offers free food and personal care products to an average of 145 people a month from a client list of more than 400. Here's what that looks like in real numbers: An average of 1 1/2 tons of food is delivered each week, and sometimes that total can rise to three tons.

The food list includes fresh fruits and vegetables, canned goods, meats and much, much more. Most of it is purchased through the Oregon Food Bank, which charges the program prices ranging from 25 percent to full cost.

"Full cost is still a fraction of retail," Curé says. "Regardless of what item it is, Oregon Food Bank charges by weight."

Those items not available through the Oregon Food Bank are purchased at other wholesalers around Portland. The organization recently bought a used U-Haul truck to meet the con-

stant need for travel throughout the area to pick up food.

The Esther's Pantry system is unique; instead of having people just come in and get a box, it is set up like a grocery store in Northeast Portland. Clients come in, walk up and down the aisles and select the items they need.

The idea is to let them shop with self-respect, Curé says. "Maintaining their dignity is as important, if not more important, than the food they get."

Another aspect that makes Esther's Pantry different from other food bank programs, Beckley notes, is that it serves only people with AIDS. Those clients often have special dietary needs because their bodies will not tolerate certain items. By being able to come in and hand-pick the food, they do not run the risk of having to accept things they cannot eat. They also can be assured that they will have the balanced and nutritional diet they need.

"As far as I know this is the only program that operates like that," Curé says. An average food

box provided to a client weighs about 80 pounds.

To qualify for the free services, clients must have a letter from a physician indicating they meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention definition of having AIDS. They also cannot earn more than 300 percent of the federal poverty guideline. For those who are unable to make it to the Esther's Pantry "store," a delivery service is available, but the preference is for the client to try to arrange for a friend, significant other or family member pick things up.

The need for services is growing all the time, according to Beckley and Curé. In fact, Esther's Pantry adds about five new clients each month, and the total number always rises around the holidays.

"You can look at the statistics, and every year it is the same thing," Curé says. "Toward the end of the year people really need our help."

And despite the new financial challenge, Esther's Pantry always is looking for more clients who need the services it offers. "We are especially looking for women, families and people of color," Beckley says. "We want people to know that the services are available."

Now that the Ryan White funding has been cut, the need for donations is as strong as ever. Beckley says that food especially is essential but that money is also "very welcome. Whatever anyone wants to give, we will gratefully accept it."

To make a donation or volunteer, call David Beckley or Gregg Curé at 503-493-2222 or visit ESTHER'S PANTRY at 2761 N.E. Halsey St.

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David Beckley (left) and Gregg Curé are raising money to keep the program alive

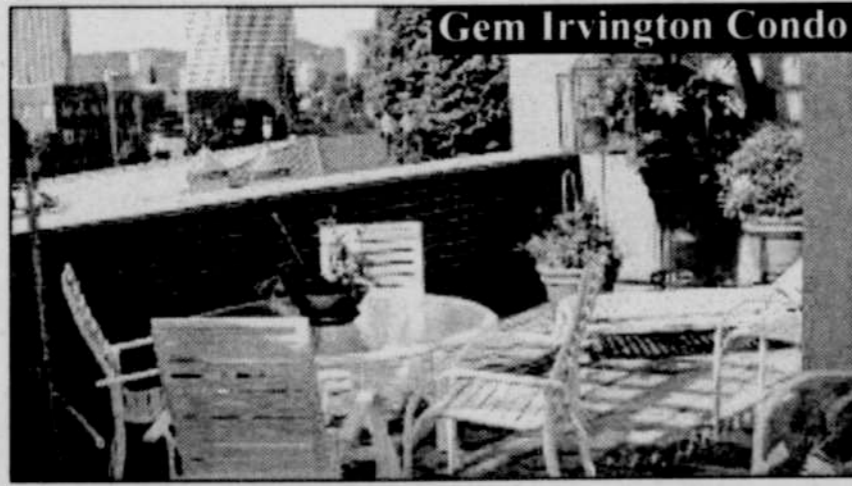
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