

Metro Caring Hunger Relief Center's new Denver facility allows growth

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Vivian Freeman selects a bag of lettuce in the grocery area at Metro Caring Hunger Relief Center on May 7. The Metro Caring Hunger Relief Center opened its new facility last month at the same location as its old center, but with three times the space. (Seth McConnell, *YourHub* file)

Dorothy Garcia has been trying for a while to get into the food market at Metro Caring's Hunger Relief Center. She was unsuccessful until last month.

Garcia, 84, can now be a regular thanks to the new building that opened in March; at 16,000 square feet, it is more than three times the size of the previous Hunger Relief Center.

"I couldn't get in at the old building because it was too crowded," Garcia said. "This time it's really a snap."

The Metro Caring Hunger Relief Center serves hungry families in Denver by allowing them to shop for free in its market once a month. Metro Caring also provides nutritional tips, gardening classes and financial assistance up to \$1,000 on delinquent cell phone or energy bills.

Since coming last month, Garcia has already sorted out her electric bill, and the food has been a big help for her tight budget.

"Our utilities are sky high," she said. "I had to get help for that. I can't make it with what I get every month."

The new \$5-million center, 1100 E. 18th St., serves the entire Denver metro area, but according to program director Ryan Galanaugh, the majority of clients come from the surrounding Five Points, Whittier and Cole neighborhoods, as well as Montbello and Aurora. The center performed 110,000 services last year and typically serves about 125 families per day. Those figures are expected to increase. The old facility was torn down last year, and the new center built in its place.

"Now that we have increased capacity, it's going to be really interesting to see how many more families utilize our services," Galanaugh said.

Most of the food at the market is donated from places such as Whole Foods or Trader Joe's.

Galanaugh said the experience for clients is also more rewarding since people can select what they would like to eat for the month.

"The great thing about this shopping model is we're trying to replicate what we see at Trader Joe's or Whole Foods," he said. "At food banks, you tend to get a prepackaged box. This is a more dignified experience."

The new facility is also growing its classes to include nutrition and finance assistance. The organization will expand gardening classes with a new rooftop garden and greenhouse.

"We have really not been able to adequately meet the community's need because we've been restricted by space," Galanaugh said.

In the new greenhouse, gardening and nutrition coordinator Reuben Gregory is working on planting some warm-weather vegetables to be sold in the market and some herbs that will go out to some restaurants.

Gregory also runs some of the gardening classes at the center, but he wasn't able to do much at the church Metro Caring used during construction.

"We could have a gardening class at the old location, but it was tough," he said. "It was a really small garden."

At the market, about 10 families at a time can pick out their goods for the month. The typical family leaves with 84 pounds of goods. The majority of those are fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy or whole-grain breads.

While families are waiting for their turn, they can meet with community navigators for assistance or try some healthy samples prepared by volunteers. Requirements are light to take part: People only need to show a valid ID and have a current piece of mail. There is no needs test.

Volunteers are key for the center, and Metro Caring uses thousands per year. Sharon Adkins comes on Thursdays and helps clients select fruits and vegetables. She said this new center is a whole new world compared to where Metro Caring was just two months ago.

"I don't even know where to begin," Adkins said. "This is new, organized — everything is just perfect."

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