



Food, Fellowship Flow At South Jersey Dream Center

National Park Hope Mobile Site Feeds 125 Families Monthly

After four years of going it alone, Walter Spring was ready to ask for help. He borrowed his sister-in-law's car, and on a bright Tuesday morning in April drove from his Bridgeport home to the fire hall in National Park.

He stood in a line that spilled out from the hall onto Hessian Avenue, just a few minutes past nine, waiting his turn to register for food assistance at a pantry operated by *South Jersey Dream Center* – one of FBSJ's *Hope Mobile* distribution sites.

"I've been on disability since 2012, just piecing things together," states Walter, 58, a lifelong mechanic. "Half of my money these days goes to rent; by month's end, there's just not much left."

Inside the hall, *SJ Dream Center* staff and volunteers are busy registering clients and prepping rows of tables with an appealing assortment of food selections: grains, meats, produce, breads, beverages, and baked goods.

Walter surveys the room and waits in a seating area for his turn to shop. "This will make a big difference," he says. "As you get older, you accept the idea that you need help. I am glad I came out today."



Walter Spring waits for his turn to shop

Founded in 2010, the *South Jersey Dream Center* is the vision of Pastor Joe Fortunato and his wife Natalie. The center provides pantry services and supplies clothing and household items, too. Before each monthly food distribution, clients have the option to attend a workshop on topics ranging from job readiness to healthcare. FBSJ's *Healthy Living Initiative* team recently presented a workshop on smart shopping practices and nutrition awareness.

"The goal is to meet basic needs while respecting the dignity of each individual," explains Natalie, who directs daily operations. Toward that end, she says that food items are not pre-bagged and simply handed to clients who come to the *Dream Center*.

"Our guests shop through our makeshift grocery store. They select the food they want for their families, with our volunteers assisting them through the process, including helping to load vehicles. It creates community."



Westville resident Lisa Smith, 51, has been receiving help at the *Dream Center* for about one year. After working 20 years in medical billing, she had to leave her position for health reasons. She lives on disability payments and \$70 in food stamp benefits monthly.

"This place means so much to all of us," states Lisa. "The experience, the interaction with staff, it is always very positive. Each time I come here, I am fed physically and spiritually. I connect with others who are struggling. We catch up on things, we lift one another up."

Lisa Smith discusses food options with Dream Center volunteers

At the April pantry distribution, 125 residents came out to the *Dream Center*; many said they were working a part-time job or earning low wages. They wouldn't know what they would do without the pantry help.

Pantry Supervisor Hilari Luck has a front-row seat to the impact of the *South Jersey Dream Center*.

"These are hard-working families, for the most part, and retirees who are struggling," states Hilari. "And some folks have just taken in a family member, so things have gotten tighter. They don't want to be in the situations they are in. They come here a bit deflated, but we see to it that they leave encouraged."