

ISLAND GROWN INITIATIVE

\$1 Million capacity-building grant for their new Oak Bluffs island food center facility



The new Island Food Center at 114-116 Dukes County Avenue will feature the permanent home of the Island Food Pantry, with ample storage and facilities to meet the growing need for food assistance.

According to the Island Grown Initiative, food insecurity on the Vineyard has grown exponentially in the last several years. With 20% of Islanders paying more than half their income on housing, more and more families are seeking food assistance, with elders and children making up one-third of the Island Food Pantry's client base of 4,200.

After years of operating out of a church basement in Vineyard Haven, the Food Pantry merged with Island Grown Initiative and moved to the Portuguese American Club in early 2021, just as the need for food assistance took off. With the growing demand and the lease on the space set to end in 2024, the need for a larger and more permanent home for the Food Pantry became critical.

From 742 unique food pantry visits a month in 2019, the number has climbed to 2,000 a month, today.

"We're seeing professional workers — nurses, social workers, teachers ... people who just can't make it from paycheck to paycheck, coming in to make sure they have food for their families and themselves," according to Rebecca Haag, executive director of Island Grown

Initiative. "These are working people, working families. They're contributing to the Island. All of us survive here because we have this kind of labor."

To meet this growing need, Island Grown Initiative approached Martha's Vineyard Bank Charitable Foundation with a proposal for a \$1 million grant to construct a new food distribution center.

The new site will not only give the Island Food Pantry a permanent location, but also the ability to store three to four weeks' worth of groceries and prepared meals to ensure backup supplies are available in the event of storms or other disruptions of deliveries from the mainland.

The new facility, located on Dukes County Avenue in Oak Bluffs, offers ample warehouse, retail, and office space, complete with a loading dock for the refrigerated truck that makes weekly trips to the mainland for donated and low-cost foods. The property also has an apartment that is now home to the newly-hired Island Grown Schools educator for Oak Bluffs, a position that had been hard to fill without available housing.



This location on Dukes County Avenue in Oak Bluffs will be the future home of the Island Food Center. Photo courtesy IGI.



Rebecca Hag and Merrick Carreiro showing the plans for the new site redevelopment. Photo courtesy Jeanna Sheppard.



The Island Food Pantry has seen its clients more than double in the last three years. Photo courtesy Ray Ewing.

At the new location in Oak Bluffs, the food pantry will allow clients to place their orders in advance, using a simple mobile phone application with photos of products in stock they can select. Their orders will be packed and ready for people to pick up at predetermined time slots, which should help solve the problem of long lines and parking lot congestion that can occur at the current location. In-person shopping will be available only to seniors, who benefit from the regular outing and social contact with volunteers.

FROM ISLAND GROWN INITIATIVE'S GRANT APPLICATION

Island Food Center

What we lack to maintain our programs and services is adequate infrastructure. Until last year we were renting various kitchens for prepared meals, the Island Food Pantry lease at the PA Club in Oak Bluffs ends in the first quarter of 2024, and we lack sufficient warehouse space. Right now, we have storage for only the food distributed that very week. If the ferries don't run, there is insufficient food to meet the demand.

In December of 2022, we acquired a catering company and secured a long-term lease on a commercial kitchen at the Airport Office Park. We still needed a permanent home for the Island Food Pantry and a Warehouse; that is why IGI purchased the Dukes Country Avenue building. This building will allow for our clients to come to pick up groceries, protein, fresh produce, and dairy products. For those who can't reach us, there is pre-order online option and volunteers pack the products and deliver.

Investment Impact and Return

This \$1M investment will help serve over 4,200 (registered Pantry clients) and another 800 through the prepared meals program. This represents 20% of year-round Islanders. Other than the Hospital, it's unlikely that another Island organization has that broad a reach. Your investment will serve an estimated 5,000 unique lives on the Island; a \$200/person investment that lasts over a minimum of 20 years and likely longer. It would be hard to find an investment that can match that impact on the Island community.