

To combat hunger, Newton opens a community 'Freedge'

By **Angela Yang** Boston University journalist, Updated March 3, 2021, 5:22 p.m.



Newton's first-ever community fridge will arrive at 420 Watertown Street, in the parking lot of Central Drapery and Dry Cleaning, in mid-March. (ANGELA YANG PHOTO) LF

Just hop off the T, drop by the outdoor refrigerator and pick up some free food to take home when you need it. That's what Newton residents will be able to do any hour of any day when the city's first-ever Freedge opens in Nonantum on March 14.

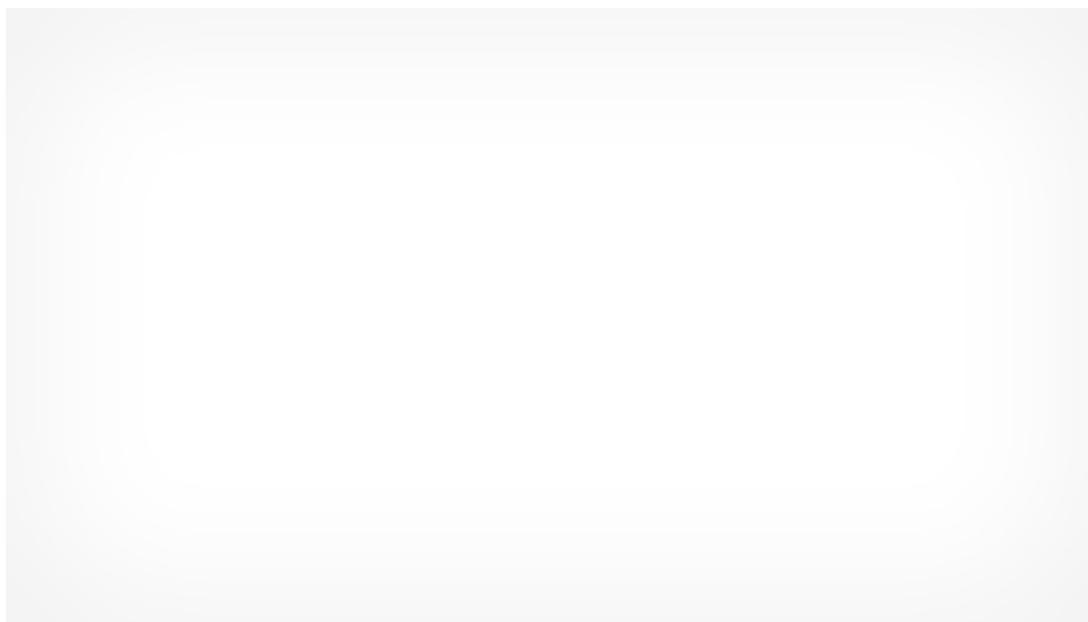
[The Freedge](#) — or free fridge — will offer food staples like produce, milk, eggs, and bread, along with prepared meals. A pantry next to the fridge will also provide personal care items such as soap, toothbrushes, and toothpaste.

It joins a number of community fridges in the Greater Boston area but is taking advantage of a wider community collaboration, said Regina Wu, president of the Newton Food Pantry, which leads the initiative.

“We were approaching it from a different manner, I think, than a lot of the other Freedges around the country in that we are already distributing food at a food pantry,” Wu said. “Unlike other grass-roots organizations, we’re able to leverage some of our connections.”

A network of nearly 30 businesses have committed to donating foods, whether groceries or prepared meals, and 10 local organizations are coordinating volunteers for the maintenance of the fridge, according to the collaborative’s website.

ADVERTISING



Wu said many of the Newton Food Pantry’s clients live in Nonantum. Aside from placing the Freedge in an area with high need, Wu said she was determined to install it at a location with high visibility, parking spaces, and nearby public transit for the convenience of users and donors.

But securing such a space was difficult, she said — businesses initially interested in

donating some outdoor space backed out after realizing the fridge might be a long-term liability. Ultimately, Central Drapery and Dry Cleaning, 420 Watertown St., offered up its parking lot space for organizers to begin building a shed for the Freedge.

“There were a couple days where I literally went door to door, like a salesperson, with my marketing info to explain about the Freedge concept and what it would look like,” Wu said.

Johnny’s Luncheonette had been donating soup to the Newton Food Pantry since the start of the pandemic. Co-owner Karen Masterson said the restaurant was immediately willing to contribute when Wu reached out about potential donations for the Freedge.

The retro diner plans to donate between seven and 10 quarts of soup every Monday, offering a variety of soups from matzoh ball to butternut squash to black bean. Soup is an “ideal” meal to have in a community fridge, Masterson said, because it’s both portable and nourishing.

Masterson said she hopes the initiative will help destigmatize hunger. Some residents may find it difficult to picture food insecurity in a wealthy suburban city like Newton, she said, but the issue can persist in “surprising” places.

“How many times do we open the fridge in our home and just take for granted that there’s something in it?” she said. “Food insecurity doesn’t mean that someone is starving on the street in a third-world-country scenario. It can mean you just don’t have enough food to make the week, or to make the month.”

The Newton Food Pantry has seen a threefold [increase](#) in the number of clients requesting its services since the pandemic took hold, Wu said. The pantry is now serving more than 250 households a week, up from 90 pre-pandemic, and has doubled its operating budget.

Wu said she believes many families in Newton had been living “on the edge” before the pandemic, straddling the line between being able to purchase food and having to ask for

help. But the socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19 pushed these people into the group that's now openly in need of assistance, she said.

She said she has noticed the stigma surrounding food insecurity, and it may disincentivize people from coming out to a food pantry.

"That is why we looked at this Freedge collaborative as such a great opportunity," Wu said. "It's a way to get people food when they need it in an anonymous way."

Being open 24/7, the Freedge can also serve as a consistent resource for families who need food on a day when their local food pantry is closed.

Sindy Wayne, volunteer coordinator for the Freedge collaborative, said seeing businesses and nonprofits come together to help realize a mission to combat local hunger has been "really exciting."

Volunteer organizations can be either senior partners, which cover duties one day a week, or junior partners, which do so one day every two weeks. Each team's volunteers will work in shifts throughout the day to pick up donations from business partners, stock the fridge, and clean the shelves, as well as toss out expired food or unacceptable donations.

The Rotary Club of Newton, a junior partner, has worked with the Newton Food Pantry over the past several months. Its president, Ron Faccenda, said the Freedge initiative fell into a natural focus of the club, which has donated to Newton's food pantries throughout last year.

"When the call came out that they needed volunteers, it was hard to say no to this," Faccenda said. "All it [takes is] a drive by one of the food pantries in Newton to see a half-mile, three-quarter-mile line of cars lined up to get food to really be struck with how significant the need is, even in Newton."

Wu said she hopes the Freedge idea catches on enough so that Newton community

members will begin dropping off items on their own volition. But for now, donors and volunteers are ready to sustain the community fridge.

“All these different businesses are themselves struggling — restaurants are not having an easy time of it — and yet they’re willing to find a way to donate,” Wu said. “I think it’s very, very heartwarming.”

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