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Food bank opens new kitchen, plans training program

Nonprofit celebrates \$1.4 million addition, hopes to use more donated foods

By Mary Gail Hare, The Baltimore Sun
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The Maryland Food Bank is showing off a new, \$1.4 million kitchen addition at its **Halethorpe** headquarters, and officials plan to use the added space to expand the organization's reach into job training programs.

The nonprofit, which provided more than 14 million meals last year, will use the 6,000-square-foot addition to house a culinary school. The new space will also expand meal preparation and food storage areas. The food bank held a ribbon cutting Tuesday for the facility, which opens next week.

"I know the meals created in the kitchen are going directly to those who need them most," said CEO Deborah Flateman. "There's also life-changing education going on."

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The first class of 25 students will soon begin a free 12-week course that leads to a certification in the food industry. The expanded space will allow staff to prepare and freeze at least another 1 million more meals annually and to find uses for all the food that is donated, administrators said.

"I have two goals for this space," said John May, the food bank's operations chief. "The first is to move more food in more avenues. The second is to someday dine in a Baltimore restaurant and see one of our students is the chef."

May led guests, including state and county officials, on a tour of the space that is color-coded to match its production line — red for the delivery of raw foods, green for preparation and yellow for the cooking area.

"This kitchen will be easy to work in," said Aida Blanco, the food bank's newly hired executive chef. "It is set up with a beautiful flow."

The frozen dinners will come with nutritional information — thanks to a new computer program — and directions for preparation, which can be as easy as immersing the package in boiling water.

In her new job, Blanco, who has worked for Disney and for the Hilton Hotel chain, will be a teacher as well as a cook.

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"We will be changing lives by providing students with skills," she said.

While students are learning, they will be producing food for needy people, said Flateman. She patterned the school after a program she began several years ago in Vermont. Its graduates posted a 97 percent retention rate in their jobs, she said. Students here will follow their course work with a two-week internship at an area restaurant and will receive job placement counseling.

The food bank posts its motto over the 10 delivery bays adjoining its main entrance. It reads, "Until hunger ends."

Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr. said the food bank's mission has become increasingly crucial lately. About 466,000 Marylanders live below the poverty level, he said, and underemployed people have become fastest-growing segment of that population.

He congratulated the food bank on its history of giving and its newest endeavor.

"This was the first food bank on the East Coast and the third in the nation," he said. "It has made a difference in countless lives."

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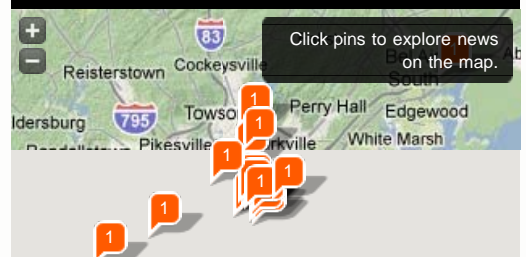
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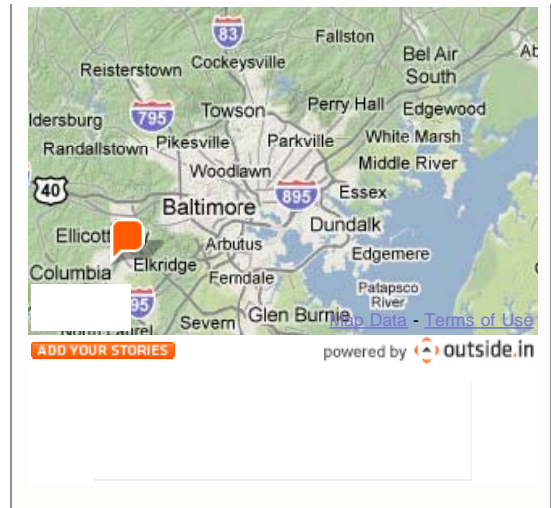
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