



Outreach House and Lombard / Villa Park Food Pantry and Clothes Closet combined their services into one accessible facility.

Accessible Services, All Under One Roof

The Mission Sustainability Initiative at Forefront helped two small nonprofits serving the same clients merge to benefit their clients. Through their co-location, Outreach House has dramatically increased both quality of service and the number of clients they reach.



Sustained Collaboration Type

Merger

MSI Grant Types

Exploration & Implementation

Collaboration Process Timeline

2019 - 1021

Partners

Outreach House
Lombard / Villa Park Food Pantry and
Clothes Closet

Outcomes

They created a new, accessible, and highly trafficked space that the community embraces through greater donations and volunteerism. Significant increases in the number of individuals served and visits/resources distributed.



In 2019,

Hester Bury was working hard as a volunteer for a food pantry in the United Methodist Church in Lombard. Within a couple of blocks, there were a lot of services for people experiencing material hardship, but they weren't coordinated.

Hester explained,

“Two different churches, one housed the food pantry and the clothes closet. The other had infant needs (diapers, infant clothing, and infant hygiene) and emergency assistance. We were literally across the street from each other, and we knew that a lot of guests were going to both locations. But having to go here one day and another place the next because we weren't open at the same time, which didn't seem to make sense.”

Neither location was ADA accessible, which was a problem because many of the volunteers and guests had disabilities. The food pantry was limited in its fundraising and ability to move quickly because it was under the 501(c)3 of the United Methodist Church, and everything had to go through the church council. So, Board members from both organizations got everyone together just to start talking and brainstorming what they could do together.

Exploring a Merger

The group applied for and received an exploratory grant from the Mission Stability Initiative, a member of the Sustained Collaboration Network. The Mission Sustainability Initiative also introduced a consultant and

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pro-bono lawyer who worked with the group. Referrals like these are essential for non-profits looking to merge or engage in other types of sustained collaboration. Kate Piatt-Eckert, Director of the Mission Sustainability Initiative, explained, “If you need a strategic planning consultant, you know how to Google ‘strategic planning consultant.’ However, developing partnerships requires so many different levels of expertise that organizations typically engage in once in their

careers. They don't always know the terms to use or the people to look for, so the role of the MSI becomes sort of a concierge in helping connect folks with the resources they need."

The group worked with Jessica Bull-ock, formerly of AltruNext. The merger talks happened during COVID, so, according to Bury, everything was virtual. "As a committee, we met mostly in somebody's backyard outside, but we were on Zoom with the consultant. She laid out a thoughtful plan over six months of the milestones we needed to hit in terms of the legal piece of merging the two organizations. I think, really, we just needed that structure."

The organizations were both small. Neither had full-time staff, and there were no substantial assets to manage. In some ways, mergers of smaller organizations can be much simpler than larger ones. They can move much faster, too.

The result of the merger was that the organization more than doubled its net assets from about \$80,000 to about \$225,000 in the first year.

The partnership to merge Outreach House with the Lombard/Villa Park Food Pantry and the Clothes Closet at First United Methodist Church was completed in August 2021. The result of the merger was that the organization more than doubled its net assets from about \$80,000 to about \$225,000 in the first year.



All Under One Roof

In August 2022, they brought the four programs under one roof on Main Street in Lombard. The facility was a significant improvement. First, it was one floor and ADA-compliant. Second, the location on Main Street made the organization much more visible. But most importantly, they were finally all under one roof.

The co-location of all the services has been transformative for guests. Jean Stawarz, a volunteer who helped run the clothes closet, describes the transformation:

"It's wonderful to know they can come in and get help with a water, gas, or electric bill. They can get the clothes they need for the month and the food they need for the week. They can come for diapers. People have taken advantage of a variety of services. When we first opened and they realized that we were all together in one building, we got such positive feedback from people."



outcome, but it's also a really clear indicator of the impact they have."

Community Funders and supporters have also recognized the difference. Stawarz remarked, "I have been very, very positively impressed with the community. People have really stepped it up. We have a lot of local businesses that their employees will come and volunteer with us for a day. We have schools that will do little projects for us. The response has been fantastic." In addition, in 2023, Outreach House became a top-rated nonprofit by Great Nonprofits and was awarded an NBC Universal Local Impact Grant.

Bury concurred. "The guests love it. They love being able to shop and choose their own groceries ... Our goal was to provide a better service."

As a result of the merger, there have been significant increases in the number of families the programs see, the number of times those families visit, and the number of resources they receive. In 2022, they served 3480 unique families (10% increase) in 11949 visits (73% increase since 2021). They distributed 747,959 pounds of food (41% increase), 102,869 diapers (48% increase), and 600 winter coats (194% increase). Piatt-Eckert reflected on their accomplishments, "I think one of the obvious things was the almost immediate increase in service population that they experienced. I think that's the most measurable and reportable

Outreach House demonstrates how mergers, which put the client experience at the center, can make a bigger social impact. The new organization provides a better-quality service for clients. Both the community and funders have recognized the valuable impact they are making in Lombard, IL.



To learn more about the Mission Sustainability Initiative, visit myforefront.org/msi or email msi@myforefront.org.

Sustained Collaboration Network

This case study was produced for the Sustained Collaboration Network by Michelle Shumate, Ph.D. of Social Impact Consulting.