

the Harvester



Doc Finds More Than Food at the Wellness Warehouse

Doc hesitates for a moment before opening the door to the Wellness Warehouse in Odessa. He adjusts his well-worn Vietnam Veteran hat, steps inside, and greets the staff with a firm handshake and an easy smile. He's spent a lifetime serving others. Now, like many veterans, he's navigating a season where he needs support of his own.

Doc served in Vietnam, where he was physically disabled, and he later spent nearly twenty years as a drill instructor. When he came home, he kept serving. He coached Little League. He taught firearm safety to young hunters across the

region. He raised a family and took pride in teaching his grandson to hunt, making sure there was always meat in the freezer when hunting season came around.

Then, a few years ago, Doc's wife passed away. For the first time, he was living alone — learning to cook and manage a household, while navigating grief. Getting out to his tree stand became harder, and grocery prices climbed higher.

“I wasn't eating a lot; it's so expensive.”

- Doc

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Care at the Heart of the Table

Before many households settle into their day, Michelle is already moving through hers, navigating a web of responsibilities that never truly pause. Caregiving shapes nearly every hour.

Michelle cares for three family members. Her adult son has severe autism and rarely leaves the house, perhaps once every few months. Her partner lives with a physical disability and is unable to work. And though her mother doesn't live under the same roof, Michelle is deeply involved in her care as well, supporting her through ongoing mental health challenges.

Care is not a role Michelle clocks in and out of. It is constant.

To make ends meet, she visits several food pantries each week, stretching Social Security and SNAP benefits as far as possible. It's not mismanagement that brings her there. Michelle pays her bills on time. She has good credit. There simply isn't enough to cover everything.

"Coming here helps me pay my bills," Michelle explains. "If I didn't, I would have an impossible choice — rent or groceries, NYSEG bill or groceries. We receive income, but it's not enough, and the pantry helps make it last. We have a lot of out-of-pocket expenses that benefits don't cover."

Food from the pantry creates breathing room. It turns a fragile budget into something survivable. It allows Michelle to protect her family's stability while continuing to show up as a caregiver.

The impact of the pantry reaches beyond finances. When Michelle walks through the door after a pantry visit, her son lights up.

"When I come home from the pantry, my son gets excited," she says. "It feels like I'm bringing home a treat for him."

Even with so much on her shoulders, Michelle continues to look outward. She and her partner support a young man experiencing homelessness, someone her partner met years ago while driving a school bus. When he needs food or basic supplies, he knows there is a door he can knock on.

Like many families, Michelle is navigating change. The building she lives in is being sold, and while the future is uncertain, she is doing what she has always done — planning carefully, holding things together, and focusing on today.

You help make that possible. Because of you, caregivers like Michelle don't have to choose between keeping the lights on and putting food on the table. You turn food into stability, and stability into the strength to care for others, even in the face of uncertainty.



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His daughter noticed and told him about the newly opened Wellness Warehouse. His response was immediate.

“There are other people who need it more than me.”

In Doc’s mind, a man who had served his country and community his entire life shouldn’t need help. He hesitated until he learned that Kristine “Sparky” Gardner, a fellow veteran he’d known for years, was leading the pantry.

“It took a lot for me to do it,” he reflects honestly. “But I’m glad I went.”

What Doc found that first Monday morning wasn’t pity. It was welcome. Sparky greeted him like the old friend she is. They traded jokes and friendly Bills-versus-Steelers rivalry banter, the kind of shorthand only veterans share. The room felt lighter.

Now, Doc visits the Wellness Warehouse twice a month, always on Mondays. He picks up eggs, pasta, fruit, and freezer items. “I’m not quite a potatoes guy,” he jokes. “But I’m eating more fruits and vegetables now. That was always my biggest expense.”

His fridge and freezer stay full, supplemented by the occasional deer his grandson brings him, carrying on a family tradition.

But the food is only part of what keeps Doc coming back.

Staff bring his groceries out to his truck, offering support in a way that respects his independence. They *really* see *him* — really see him, honoring his lifetime of service and his choice to be there.



An introvert by nature, Doc has found connection here too. And true to who he’s always been, he’s already giving back. He shares canned goods he doesn’t use with others, and he tells fellow veterans about the pantry.

“I’ve already invited two other vets who go now,” he says, pride evident in his voice. “We weren’t treated well when we came home from Vietnam. But there are people who realize — we’re still human.”

The Wellness Warehouse just opened this past September, built through partnership and community investment. The space is provided by the local fire department, and the coolers are funded by a Food Bank grant. Sam’s Club and Dollar General provided donations, and Landon’s Pub in Watkins Glen supplied weekly pre-cooked meals.

And because of you, food assistance looks like dignity, not desperation. Your compassion helps create places where veterans like Doc can walk in with pride, feel welcome, and leave with nourishment and a sense of community. Your generosity ensures that every act of service is honored with respect and no one is left to face hunger alone.

Dollar General Partnership: Filling Coolers and Fueling Community

The call came in on an October morning. Dollar General in Chemung had a large donation ready for pickup.

When the In His Presence Pantry team arrived, they were stunned. 800 pounds of fresh milk filled the coolers. Gallons that would have gone to waste were now headed straight to family refrigerators across the community.

“Our coolers are full and ready to distribute,” the team shared. “It’s been a huge boost.”

This is what collaboration looks like in action.

Through a partnership between the Food Bank and 50 Dollar General stores across

the Southern Tier, good food that can no longer be sold — but is perfectly safe to eat — is now rescued weekly. Milk, bottled water, crackers, baking mixes, condiments, and more move from store shelves to local pantries, where they’re used right away.

At places like the Cayuta Food Pantry, coordinators have built reliable pickup routines and relationships with store staff. They know what to expect each week and how quickly families will need it. Milk becomes breakfast, bottled water fills lunch boxes, and staples turn into meals.

Behind each successful pickup are people who care deeply about where this food goes. At the Dollar General in Montour Falls, team members like Shelby, Mandy, and Andrea organize donations, communicate with local pantries, and ensure quality standards week after week. Their commitment turns logistics into a meaningful community connection.

Because you support partnerships like these, good food reaches people instead of landfills. What could have been waste becomes nourishment. Corporate capacity aligns with community needs. And together, we build a stronger, hunger-free future — one pickup, one cooler, one shared effort at a time.



foodbank
of the Southern Tier

388 Upper Oakwood Ave
Elmira, NY 14903
607-796-6061

foodbankst.org



**Working together to build
and sustain hunger-free
communities throughout the
Southern Tier.**

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