

Quinn Center ‘a Catalyst’ for Community Development in Proviso Township

Image



Designing programs and developing connections with other service providers, the [Quinn Center of St. Eulalia](#) has continued its mission of justice, health and peace for [10 years](#).

The Quinn Center is headquartered in a 50,000 square-foot former school in Maywood, yet its outreach extends to more than 14 Chicago, Illinois-area suburbs surrounding Proviso Township.

“We are a community-driven organization,” executive director Kristen Mighty says. “The things we do; the services we offer; the programs that are taking place; the

information that we give out on a weekly basis are directly derived from the community.”

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As the Quinn Center adapted programming during the COVID-19 pandemic, they ensured that residents’ physical, social and mental health needs would still be met.

“Health is the thing that connects everything and we address health at the core, where food is an essential need,” Kristen says. “It is a basic right for everybody.”

Their weekly indoor community soup kitchen shifted to an outdoor food distribution.

Kristen says the Quinn Center increased capacity and efficiency by working with partners, serving more than 20,000 individuals with bagged meals and groceries over more than a year, adding cereal, meat, dairy, and other products based on participant feedback and availability.

Youth stayed engaged.

“We did not stop programming,” Kristen says. “We figured out how to use Zoom while using it, and provided tutoring services to the students on Zoom. It really was the way they completed their school year last year.” When it was safe, the program shifted to a hybrid model.

Seniors stayed social.

Quinn Center staff and volunteers taught seniors about Zoom in one-on-one sessions. Now, there are weekly calls that offer conversation groups, light exercise classes, health education, and more.

“They look forward to it,” Kristen says. “They block it out on their calendars to make sure that they’re there and they’re hanging out with their friends on Zoom no matter what the activity might be for the day.”

From providing access to COVID-19 testing and vaccines to assessing local technology needs during food distributions, the Quinn Center worked with local agencies.

“We partner with the people of Proviso,” Kristen says. “We partner with anybody and everybody to provide the services, because we recognize that we are not the experts in all.”

When Proviso Partners for Health — a consortium of health-focused businesses and non-profits — did asset-mapping, they realized the township had lots of supportive assets, including the Quinn Center.

They also found opportunities for people to connect to assets or for non-profits to work together, such as informing people where they could access local COVID-19 vaccination sites and how to obtain free transportation to and from a vaccination site.

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Kristen says each person has unique experiences, perspectives and connections. “All of it has value; all of it has worth, and all of it is needed to address these problems — to make any kind of sustainable change,” she says. “It is not going to happen in a vacuum.”

For example, she built a relationship with her alma mater, Nazareth Academy, and connected with a master gardener through the University of Illinois Extension to help maintain the Quinn Center’s community garden.

Clover’s Garden Center, a local business, also provides supplies and volunteer labour.

“We can help kids see the food from planting, to harvesting, to making something, to inside of their bodies, and see that whole cycle,” Kristen says.

When discerning a new program, “you surround yourself with people from the community of all different walks of life — from age, race, gender — so that all of those voices are part of the conversation,” Kristen says. “Everybody digests information differently.”

Kristen is a trained scientist with bachelor’s degrees in chemistry and microbiology, a master’s degree in public health, and a doctoral degree in life sciences whose work centres on empathy.

“It’s a huge academic background in quantitative, data-driven analysis of issues — finding a gap and recommending an intervention,” she says.

“I don’t approach it in the way where it’s like ‘I need to make sure I have all these boxes checked,’” Kristen says. “I go from ‘you are a human. You are coming here and I want to connect with you and build a relationship with you.’”

The Quinn Center is a place of empowerment for residents and a place of learning for volunteers, interns and employees alike.

“I like to think of Quinn as a catalyst,” she says. “We know what the ingredients are and we try to be the environment that brings those together and catalyzes a reaction to create something that will enhance the community.”