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Oakland University students help improve food pantry efficiency

When the **Open Hands Food Pantry** in Royal Oak sought to streamline its operations and improve efficiency, it reached out to Oakland University's Industrial and Systems Engineering Department for help.

"Industrial and Systems Engineering is about seeing the bigger picture," said **Dr. Robert Van Til**, Pawley Professor of Lean Studies and Chair of the ISE Department. "We look at the systems that are in place, and we find ways to make them better."

As part of their senior design project for the ISE program, OU students Eric Seidl, Russell Bauer and Sam Khajavi have been observing the distribution process at Open Hands Food Pantry for over a month.

Their goal, Seidl said, is to "help make the processes run a little smoother, particularly when it comes to distributing food to their clients."

"They're having some trouble getting clients in and out quickly, so we're here to help them utilize their time a little better," he said.

Established in 1982, the Open Hands Food Pantry provides emergency food and toiletries to residents of Oakland County. It is located in lower level of St. John's Episcopal Church at the corner of Woodward Avenue and 11 Mile Road in Royal Oak.

"The food pantry literally started out of a closet and it grew from there," said Mary Beth Weigel, a volunteer with Open Hands and a member of St. John's Episcopal Church.

In 2015 alone, the Open Hands Food Pantry served more than 13,500 people. It is staffed entirely by volunteers and is supported by donations and grants from outside agencies.

"While it's important that Open Hands helps as many customers as possible, it's equally important that the volunteers aren't straining too much," Bauer said. "We want to make the process easier on everyone."

With that in mind, the students began looking at the current process – from the flow of people in the building to the number of steps between stations -- and ways the system can be improved.

"We had to figure out exactly what they're doing now, because we can't recommend improvements if we don't have anything to base them on," Seidl said. "So we've done data collection with cycle times, step counts, etc. to calculate different metrics that we want to base our improvements off of."

According to Bauer, one of the main issues the OU team discovered was in the bagging process.

"Right now, they have three volunteers working in a very small room in the back," he said. "It's a bit chaotic trying to have three volunteers working in such a small area. So if we can give them a larger area to do their job in, that will help them out and make it a more welcoming environment for visitors."

Seidl said the team will continue to review the current processes at Open Hands and make recommendations for improvements through November.

"We're very excited to be here," he said. "It's more than just a senior project for us. It's an opportunity to give something back to an organization that helps so many. We're very passionate about this project."

For more information about the ISE senior design project or the department, visit www.oakland.edu/ise



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Members of the Open Hands Food Pantry Board: Barbara Heath, Pete Baird, Jan Warren, Cathy Holcomb, Chuck Tucker, Russell Bauer (OU student), Sam Khajavi (OU student), Bruce Donigan, and Eric Seidl (OU student).