



Everything. That's what **Akilah Ashraf** loves about her job in the Greater Cleveland Food Bank's Help Center. "I love the people that I work with, the clients that I assist, the partners that I work with," she explains, "I'm not a baby. I'm 70-years-old. I've had a quite a few jobs. I venture to say this is the best job I've ever had. The people here are mission-minded. That goes all the way from the top of management down to the cleaning people."

Akilah is the Benefits Outreach Coordinator at the Greater Cleveland Food Bank. She works with walk-in clients who come to the Food Bank in need of assistance with finding food or signing up for benefits like SNAP. Akilah has been with the Food Bank for seven years, watching the Benefits Outreach team grow from just three people to more than 20.

At the Food Bank, keeping a client-centered focus is an integral part of the work. Every day Akilah assists clients in navigating a barrier-riddled system. But, she's happy to be there every step of the way. "I'm the person who doesn't want to give a client a piece of paper as a referral," she said, "I like to pick up the phone and ask for help on their behalf."

For Akilah, helping people is something she feels called to do. "I get up every morning and I get to help people," she says with a happy grin, "People always ask me when I'm going to retire and I say, 'when I get a job.' This isn't work. It's a mission. I get paid for this, but I also get a lot of blessings."





Every day brings a new opportunity for Akilah to impact a client's life. She has many stories to tell – each day brings a new one. Recently, a client came into the Food Bank for help with filing paperwork for his SNAP application. He told Akilah, “I like it when I come in here for you to process my paperwork. It has a nice homey feeling. And when I leave here, I feel better after talking with you.”

“That’s what I want it to be,” she responds, a small tear appearing in the corner of her eye, “There have been times I’ve come here not feeling well and left feeling better.”



For the clients served by Akilah and her colleagues, the service they receive from the Food Bank is more than helpful, it’s a lifeline. Akilah remembers meeting with a family in need of help applying for SNAP and finding food. They didn’t have food at home, so she was able to provide an emergency food bag of non-perishable food items, like peanut butter, much like one they’d receive from a partner pantry of the Food Bank. “I gave them the bag,” she said, “and their little boy said, ‘Oh! I missed you, peanut butter.’”

While the stories are often heartbreaking, Akilah feels privileged to be able to listen and assist clients served by the Food Bank. “There’s no story I’ve heard that I haven’t lived,” she said. She explained why this work is so important to her, “I went to the South where my mother was from and I visited my grandmother’s house,” she remembers, “And the memories came flooding back of her giving the homeless people who rode the trains bags of food. And then I related that to what I do and I thought, ‘perhaps this was always in my destiny to feed people.’”

And feed people she does. From starting her work with the Food Bank 25 years ago as a volunteer pantry coordinator to impacting so many lives in our Help Center today, Akilah exemplifies living a life for others.