

Panera Opens Pay-What-You-Can Restaurant in Chicago

By Alexandria Fisher, June 21, 2012

Panera Bread is putting its prices in the hands and wallets of café-goers in Chicago.

With no cash registers and no posted prices, a new Panera Cares location allows customers to pay what they can as a donation or volunteer for an hour to eat for free if they can't pay anything.



The new restaurant opened Thursday at 616 W. Diversey Parkway in Lakeview. Ron Schaich, founder and President of the Panera Bread Foundation, said the new service model is meant to improve the conditions of food security in the Lakeview area.

"The vision of Panera Cares is to use Panera's unique restaurant skills to address real societal needs and make a direct impact in communities," Schaich said in a statement.

According to a study by the Greater Chicago Food Depository, more than 9,000 Lakeview residents are "food insecure" as of 2011, making it a prime spot for the non-profit restaurant.

"It's a combination of the generosity of Chicagoans and the community needs that make the city ideal for our newest Panera Cares café," Schaich said. The Panera Cares store will serve as a test for the area.

Panera Cares is the first of its kind in Chicago and the fourth in the nation. Other locations in Missouri, Michigan and Oregon have proven to be successful, even turning a profit since their implementation two years ago.

Some Chicagoans are hesitant about the new store's targeted customer-base. "I could see a backlash of peddlers taking advantage of this," said 28-year-old Ryan Pebbles.

Others say they'd be willing to pay as much as they always do.

"Every time I've gone there before I've paid full price so I would keep paying that," said Lauren Florian, 28.