

## Freedom 90 Initiative

**Objective:** The objective of this initiative is to mobilize volunteers and staff in food banks and emergency meal programmes to advocate for urgent action by the Ontario government to reduce poverty.

**Background:** A group of food bank/emergency meal programme volunteers in York Region began to meet before the provincial election with the hopes of highlighting the issue of growing food bank use and poverty in the provincial election. We came up with what we think is a terrific idea for an initiative, but we were unable to develop it enough to launch it in the election period. Nonetheless we think it is a good idea and we have kept working at it.

**Activities:** The main activities of the initiative are intended to enable volunteers to highlight that they would like to be able to 'retire' from the voluntary work of providing food for people with low incomes – but they can't do that until the government accepts its responsibility to provide people with an income adequate for housing, healthy food and the other basic necessities.

**Freedom 90 Pledge:** Food Bank and emergency meal programme volunteers will be invited to sign a 'Freedom 90' pledge that says

- We believe the Ontario government has a responsibility to ensure that everyone in Ontario has an income adequate for housing, healthy food and the other basic necessities
- We believe the government has the responsibility to provide adequate incomes, and reduce food bank use, before the volunteer who signs the pledge, turns 90.
- Provide a brief statement of experience (see attached form) that describes the year the volunteer started volunteering in food bank/emergency meal programme; how many years they have been volunteering; whether the need in their community has grown or declined; and when they hope to be able to retire from this work.
- We will know that poverty is being reduced in Ontario when the food banks close because they are no longer necessary.
- There are many ways to reduce poverty in Ontario
- Ontario is too wealthy a society for there to be so much inequality and therefore Ontario can afford to reduce poverty

The Freedom 90 initiative is developing publicity materials to support this initiative including

- A brochure outlining the Freedom 90 pledge
- A video of food bank/emergency room volunteers performing “50 Ways to Close the Food Banks” (with apologies to Paul Simon) which it will release when we launch this initiative.
- A website

**Timetable:** We would like to ‘formally’ launch the initiative in the new year (date to be determined) and would like to build towards that launch in the following ways

- Secure commitments of several food bank/emergency meal programmes as founding members of the Freedom 90 initiative
- Obtain pledges from 100 individual volunteers before the launch
- Prepare the publicity materials
- Form a planning committee for the launch – which could be a workshop style event.

**How you can be involved:** There are several ways to support this initiative

- Your organization could be a founding member of Freedom 90
- You could meet with volunteers in your organization and ask them to fill in the statement of experience
- Ask volunteers to sign the pledge
- Volunteer to join the planning committee for the launch of Freedom 90
- Make a financial donation from your organization – we are anticipating costs of \$2500 to create the publicity materials