

FOOD FOR CHANGE: From Charity to Dignity 2013

Looking at possibilities

Food banks were started as a short term response to a temporary problem. In the last 32 years a whole charity based food distribution system has grown up that is designed specifically for poor people. This “system” includes community meals, food banks, distribution of damaged grocery store items and end of day perishable food, and manufacturer dumping of failed products.

There have been many social and technological changes in the last thirty-two years; however, food banks remain rooted in the distribution of non-perishable food. This antiquated model undermines people’s dignity, distributes foods high in sugar, fat and salt, contributes to a diet that does not promote good health, and does not make the recipient food secure. With each passing decade, the reliance on donations to support emergency food programs becomes more entrenched, despite the limitations with this approach.

It’s time to rethink the model.

Dignity	Although food banks allow many people to feel good about helping, we need to find ways to contribute that do not erode the self-esteem and dignity of the recipient
Grocery cards	Giving people grocery cards will allow them to select foods that reflect individual needs, and allow choices that the rest of the population enjoys both in selection and hours of access
Social assistance reform	The Social Assistance Review Commission report “Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario” has made sweeping recommendations to move Social Assistance recipients out of poverty
Affordable housing	In the absence of national and provincial housing strategies, municipalities including York Region are leading the way in trying to address the issue of lack of affordable housing
Student nutrition programs	Eating healthy food at school supports learning and lifelong healthy eating habits
Healthy food system	The York Region Food Charter promotes a system from farm to plate that provides access to local, affordable and nutritious food
Employment	People need a secure job with benefits and stable, adequate hours
Living wage	There is a growing movement across Canada to pass policies whereby employers pay at minimum, a living wage to employees. This wage is calculated based on local costs of housing, food and other basic necessities

Food security is defined as a situation in which all people obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes self-reliance and social justice. (Hamm and Bellows, J Nutr Educ Behav. 2003; 35:27-43)

Looking at York Region

In March 2012 York Region Food Network interviewed 165 clients in six food banks. The results of that survey reveal that food bank clients are like many of us in York Region: educated, employed, and in families with children.

Educated

Of the adults interviewed in York Region food banks, 74% had either graduated high school, had some college or university education, had graduated from college or university, or had a postgraduate university degree. A full 20% had a university degree, a college diploma, or a postgraduate university degree.

Employed

While it is logical to expect that income from employment would be sufficient to pay for basic needs such as housing and food, the York Region Food Network survey found that 40% of households accessing a food bank had at least one member of the household employed. Similarly, the Canadian Community Health Survey data from 2007-2008 reveal that 57% of Canadians who are in food insecure households were reliant on employment income.¹

Families with children

41% of people accessing a food bank in York Region are children.² These data are consistent with Census data which found in 2006 that one in seven York Region children under the age of 18 years lived in low income households.³

What is the comparison between income and basic needs?

Each year, the York Region Community and Health Services Department conducts the *Nutritious Food Basket Survey* to measure the cost of basic healthy eating. The following chart compares incomes and basic needs using the average cost of rent in York Region and the cost of a Nutritious Food Basket in 2012. This chart only includes rent and food, not the many other living expenses households must pay each month.

When monthly income is allocated, people usually pay their rent and other fixed expenses such as heat, hydro and transportation first. They buy food after. When income is inadequate, food becomes a “discretionary” expense. This results in an inadequate diet of poor nutritional value.

	Two parents with Two Children, Ontario Works	One Person Household, Ontario Works
Estimated total monthly income	\$2,032	\$642
Estimated monthly rent	\$1,233	\$770
Nutritious Food Basket cost	\$820	\$275
Remaining funds for further needs	\$21 Shortfall	\$403 Shortfall

Canadian adults in food insecure households consume fewer servings of milk products, fruits and vegetables and, in some cases, meat and meat alternatives.⁴ As incomes drop, high calorie foods that are low in nutrients provide people with their daily calories, at a lower cost.⁵

The probability of adults with chronic health conditions in severely food insecure households is much higher than adults in food secure households.¹ People in food insecure households are more likely to report poor health, restricted activity and multiple health conditions. These conditions include major depression and distress, as well as poor social support. People in food insecure households are also more likely to report heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and food allergies.⁶

Additionally, low income lone mothers have been found to compromise their own nutritional intake in order to preserve the adequacy of their children's diets.⁷ As an example of the harmful effects of food insecurity, a recent study in Nova Scotia revealed that children with diabetes from food insecure families had higher rates of hospitalization than children with diabetes from food secure families. Food security status was the only independent predictor for these higher rates of hospitalization.⁸

As well, researchers following children and youth over a 10 year period report that children and youth in Canada who experience hunger are more likely to have poorer health outcomes even when baseline health and household markers of disadvantage are accounted for. Repeated exposures to food insecurity exacerbate these adverse health effects.⁹ Moreover, there is direct relationship between overall diet quality and academic performance.¹⁰

52,879 people were fed in York
Region in 2012*

*at 8 reporting food banks

Why are people hungry in York Region?

Precarious Employment

A 2013 report called *It's More than Poverty* describes what the authors call "employment precarity", which is characterized by lack of job security or benefits, lower incomes, income variability, unpredictable work schedules, limited career prospects, anticipated future reductions in hours, less unionization, and fear of raising an issue of employment rights. The report states that "... precarious employment relationships are becoming the 'new normal' for our workforce." Temporary and precarious employment rates are higher in York Region than neighbouring GTA/Hamilton communities. This type of employment has increased by nearly 50% in the last 20 years.¹¹ Similarly, the 2009 Senate Report, *In From the Margins: A Call To Action On Poverty, Housing and Homelessness*,¹² also points to the increase in precarious employment as leading to a failure of employment to lead people out of poverty.

Income inequality

In their extensive review, the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario¹³ reported that the issue of rising income inequality needs to be examined. The report *Making Ends Meet in York Region* illustrated how there is beginning to be a polarization between high and low income earners from 2001-2006, compared to 1996-2001. Moreover, in York Region, the number of people living in poverty grew 55% from 2001 to 2006 and the number of children in low income households increased 62%.³

Housing costs

Households are considered to have a housing affordability problem if more than 30 percent of household income is spent on housing costs. In 2006, nearly 48 percent of tenants in York Region spent 30 percent or more of their household income on housing costs.¹⁴

Social assistance rates

The Health Canada Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion¹⁵ reports that in 2007-2008 56% of families reliant on social assistance were food insecure. Researchers point out that the social assistance system is designed so that recipients decimate assets and savings. Consequently, they cannot manage unavoidable expenses and are trapped in poverty.



The current annual income and benefits rate for a single adult on Ontario Works is \$8,192. This amount is significantly lower than the Statistics Canada low income cut-off (LICO) amount (calculated before tax) of \$19,496.¹⁶ LICO is an annual income amount, below which a family would likely spend 20% more money on necessities - such as food, shelter and clothing - than an average family would.



‘Dignified access to food for all’ is a value articulated in the York Region Food Charter. We need to move beyond simplistic solutions to policies that ensure adequate household income for food.

¹ Tarasuk, Valerie. February 9, 2012 presentation to Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASwnfMnxwqs> (accessed April 12, 2013)

² York Region Food Bank statistics. York Region Food Network.

³ Human Services Planning Board of York Region. *Making Ends Meet in York Region*. 2011.

⁴ Kirkpatrick, Sharon I & Tarasuk, Valerie. (2008). Food insecurity is associated with nutrient inadequacies among Canadian Adults and Adolescents. *J. Nutr.* 138:604-612.

⁵ Drewnowski, A. (2009). Obesity, diets, and social inequalities. *Nutrition reviews*. 67(Suppl. 1).

⁶ Vozoris, N. & Tarasuk, V. (2003) Household food insufficiency is associated with poorer health. *J. Nutr.* 133:120-126.

⁷ McIntyre, Lynn, Glanville, Theresa, Raine, Kim D, Dayle, Jutta B., Anderson, Bonnie and Battaglia, Noreen. (2003). Do low-income mothers compromise their nutrition to feed their children? *CMAJ*. March 18, 2003; 168(6).

⁸ Marjerrison, Stacey, Cummings, Elizabeth, Glanville, Theresa, Kirk, Sara, and Ledwell, Mary. (2011). Prevalence and Associations of Food Insecurity in Children with Diabetes Mellitus. *J Pediatr* 20011; 158:607-11.

⁹ Kirkpatrick, Sharon, McIntyre, Lynn, and Potestio, Melissa. (2010). Child Hunger and Long-term Adverse Consequences for Health. *Arch Pediatr Adol Med.* 164(8): 754-762.

¹⁰ Florence, M., Asbridge, M. & Veugelers, P. (2008). Diet quality and academic performance. *Journal of School Health*. 78(4).

¹¹ Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario, McMaster University Social Sciences & United Way Toronto. (2013). *It's More than Poverty: Employment Precarity and Household Well-being*.

¹² The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. (2009). *In from the Margins: A call to action on poverty, housing and homelessness*

¹³ Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. Frances Lankin and Munir A. Sheikh, Commissioners. (2012). *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*. A Report to the Minister of Community and Social Services.

¹⁴ York Region. *Just the facts about your community: Diversity of residents living in York Region: Employment and income*. February 13 2009.

¹⁵ Household Food Insecurity In Canada in 2007-2008: Key Statistics and Graphics. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/surveill/nutrition/commun/insecurit/key-stats-cles-2007-2008-eng.php> (accessed on May 24, 2013).

¹⁶ Report No. 8 of the Communication and Health Services Committee Regional Council Meeting of October 20, 2011.



350 Industrial Parkway S., Aurora, ON L4G 3V7

Phone: 905-841-3101 • Toll-free: 1-866-454-YRFN (9736) • Fax: 905-841-3789

Website: www.yrfn.ca • Facebook: York Region Food Network • Twitter: @YRFoodNetwork