York Region Food Network

NETWORK NEWS

FALL/WINTER 2024

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COMMUNITY VOICES AT THE HEART OF OUR WORK

As 2024 draws to a close, we at York Region Food Network are filled with immense gratitude. This past year, we have been privileged to witness the powerful stories shared by the communities we serve. In this newsletter, you will hear these voices—stories from participants, volunteers, and community partners—that speak to the true heart of our work.

York Region Food Network is a leading food security organization that advocates for the reduction of food insecurity. Over the past year we've listened closely to feedback from participants, volunteers, and community allies.

One message was crystal clear: food brings people through our doors, but they return because of something even more profound —the welcoming environment, the sense of belonging, the mental health benefits that they see and feel in themselves, and the social connections they form. This is powerful. It shows that the community food programs that York Region Food Network runs positively impact physical, mental and social health.

The numbers speak volumes:

- As a result of our programs**, 100%** of households served reported **increased access to adequate fresh produce.**
- **90%** of households report being **less anxious about running out of food** during the project periods.
- **100%** of households **feel a greater sense of community** as a result of our programs.

These statistics are a testament to the transformative power of the work we do and the direct impact on the individuals and households we support. Behind each number is a person, a family, and a story of resilience and hope.

As we look towards 2025, the challenges of food insecurity remain daunting and will continue to impact 1 in 7 households across York Region. We remain committed to working towards a food secure York Region where every person has access to nourishing food, but we can't do it without the generosity of people like you.

If you're able, we kindly ask that you consider an end-of-year donation to York Region Food Network. Every dollar helps us strengthen our programs, reach more of the communities we serve and expand our advocacy efforts for food security, so that we can continue to create immediate and lasting change in York Region.

Why Your Support Matters

Nourishing Lives
Your donation will directly contribute to providing innovative community food programs such as our affordable fresh food markets, community meals and our urban agriculture program.

Fostering Community Resilience
Food security is the foundation for strong, vibrant, and resilient communities. Your support provides resources so we can host cooking and gardening classes which build food skills and social connections.

How You Can Make a Difference

Donate Today
Your financial contribution, no matter the size, has a profound impact.

Spread the Word
Share our cause with your friends, family, and social networks. The more people who know about our work, the greater our collective impact.

Volunteer Your Time
If you're able, consider donating your time to support community food programs. Your hands-on support can make a tangible difference in our community.

Corporate Matching
Check with your employer about corporate matching programs. Your donation may be eligible for a matching contribution, effectively doubling the impact of your generosity.

KITCHEN AND MEAL PROGRAMS: NOURISHING MORE THAN JUST BODIES

At York Region Food Network (YRFN), our mission has always been about more than just food. Our kitchen and meal programs continue to be a critical support system for many, serving as a catalyst for connection and community building. Food nourishes not only physical health but also mental well-being, creating spaces where people come together, share stories and build meaningful relationships.

Cater Kitchen

In our Cater Kitchen run by Chef Maxine, volunteers prepare meals for Hope House's Caregiver Meal Program and then sit down to eat lunch together afterwards. Volunteers and meal recipients are rewarded with more than just food skills and hearty meals. The program (they say) lifts their spirits.

Sammi and Eric, regular participants in Cater Kitchen, have been attending YRFN programs since 2018. They share that they joined because they find the program "*fun, relaxing, and educational. More importantly, it bonds us with the community*."

Reflecting on how the program has influenced their cooking at home, Sammi and Eric mentioned that the classes remind them to eat more seasonal foods, motivate them to do more cooking and try new foods. They also emphasized that they feel lucky to be part of such a supportive and inclusive community.

On the other end of Cater Kitchen, one meal recipient from the Hope House Caregiver Meal Program sent us this message:

"*Thank you so much for all you do. Your meals are delicious and greatly appreciated. On my chemotherapy days they are so welcomed because those days are hard for me and my husband. Unfortunately, my husband had a right sided small stroke and has difficulty walking. I realize you have a lot of demand so even one meal helps us a lot.* "

Volunteer drivers also shared their perspective, saying, "*The clients are so excited on Thursday mornings when they know I am coming to deliver them food. They are anxiously looking out the window and so happy to receive their meals. The work you are doing is so valuable to the families. Thanks for all you do*."

YORK REGION FOOD CHARTER: CHARTING A NEW PATH FOR FOOD SYSTEMS

In addition to all of our programs at YRFN, we have a vibrant policy team and Food Council who advocate for a food secure York Region.

For the past year and a half, the York Region Food Council has been working hard to update the York Region Food Charter. This Charter is a big-picture vision for our local food system and a guiding document for food and farming policies and practices in our region.

Since its creation in 2013, so much has changed, from the global pandemic to rising costs of living and the growing effects of climate change.

To make sure the updated Charter reflects today's needs and priorities, the Food Council connected with nearly three hundred residents and food leaders.

These conversations gave valuable insights and provided an opportunity to build connections within the food system.

The new Food Charter will be a foundational document that will guide the Food Council's work moving forward. To make the vision in the Food Charter a reality, a set of actionable steps for the Food Council and recommendations for governments and organizations will be released simultaneously.

We're excited to share the revised York Region Food Charter with you when it's released at the end of 2024, and you'll see it shared widely throughout 2025. Keep an eye on the Food Council's social media for the release of the Food Charter that will help shape the future of food in York Region.

Instagram @yorkregionfoodcouncil

Facebook and LinkedIn: York Region Food Council

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY IMPACT

York Region Food Network is thrilled to announce that on October 23rd, we were awarded the *Award of Excellence in the Non-Profit Category* at the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's Business Excellence Awards! This recognition honours the dedicated efforts of our team, volunteers, and supporters, all working tirelessly to uplift individuals and families facing food insecurity across York Region. We are deeply grateful for this acknowledgment of our work to build a stronger, more food-secure community and share this award with everyone who contributes to making our vision a reality. Thank you for standing with us in this essential work!

AFFORDABLE FRESH FOOD MARKETS: BUILDING COMMUNITY BEYOND FOOD

Our Affordable Fresh Food Markets provide more than just access to fresh produce—they build communities, foster relationships and offer personal growth opportunities for both volunteers and participants.

Prudence, a co-lead at the Markham Market, beautifully described her experience:

"*The market has become my happy place, my second home, the place that can get me to look forward to getting out of my home. At the market, I have found my purpose. I enjoy the happiness that people give me. I pass on my culinary knowledge and skills attained on how to best cook any particular produce. In return, I have learned new recipes. I meet new people as well as joke and laugh with the regulars. This is my community. I have lived near the church for 38 years. It took a flyer on the bulletin board at 105 Gibson Community Centre to find this market that is literally in my backyard. My world has changed for the better.*"

Volunteers like Ashley, the co-lead at the Richmond Hill Market, echo similar sentiments:

"It is really nice to see a community is built around the market. Learning regular's names, asking about how the food they tried at the last market turned out. It is great to see people talking and having a treat afterwards. The amount of people that come out every time shows how much a program like the affordable fresh food market is needed. It's a positive experience each time I volunteer."

Our Fresh Food Markets and Good Food Box program also emphasize inclusivity. Our friends who volunteer with us from The ABLE Network in Stouffville has been a shining example of this. What they are saying:

"*When ABLE participants were asked to describe what the Good Food Box and Affordable Markets are to them, the words; fun, gracious, generous and helpful came to mind. They explained that volunteering at the fresh food market is their opportunity to help and give back to the community and the people in it. York Region Food Network (YRFN) is always looking to make an impact through inclusivity, whether that be through offering produce at affordable prices, or including our ABLE Stouffville friends at the market's Family Fun Day. Participants were given the opportunity to run their own table with the skills they have practiced while helping with the Market and Good Food Box programs. The ABLE Network Stouffville is so thankful for the team at YRFN that continue to let us be a part of their Good Food programs where we get to meet new friends and practice our job skills.* "

GARDENING TOGETHER, GROWING MORE THAN JUST PLANTS

Our garden volunteers, like Joan B., are the heart of our Growing to Give Garden and Assembly Park Community Gardens. Their dedication goes beyond tending to plants—it's about fostering connections, learning and giving back to the community. Here's what Joan has to say about her experience:

"Four summers ago, I volunteered to be a gardener with York Region Food Network (YRFN) at their Growing to Give Garden site.I had no idea then how much I would gain from the experience, how fun it would be, educational and fulfilling. The shared experience, knowledge and teamwork is heartwarming. Each step has been a joy to participate in, even the hard work such as starting with soil prep! Next, we plant donated seed and seedling plants, then it's watering, weeding and maintenance. Then we get to watch our garden grow and thrive to harvest!

I've made new friends and special acquaintances who garden together from summer start to October. Thanks to YRFN staff I've learned along the way about food insecurity, composting and growing methods. I recognize more plants. We've become adept at reviving donated plants that need attention. Garden events, potluck and informal get togethers have introduced me to recipes, foods, herbs and plants from other cultures. Throughout the season, we pick and pack a variety of vegetables we grew to send to the food bank and YRFN kitchen. That's the main reason I volunteer."

WINTERFRESH 2025: CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF TRIVIA AND COMMUNITY

As we prepare to celebrate our 10th Annual WinterFresh trivia fundraiser on Friday, February 28, 2025, we can't help but reflect on how it all began. WinterFresh was created with fun and finances in mind. Since YRFN raises 100% of the funds we need to run our programs and services, the Board of Directors and Staff were looking for sustainable exciting ways to fund the organization like hosting an annual, signature fundraiser.

They had seen plenty of examples of grand charitable events and felt they were ready to start their own. Members of the Board and Staff gathered to brainstorm and come up with something that would speak to us as an organization. A gala event was not in the cards, but something a little more fun and exciting could be something to try! They looked at other fundraising events for ideas and inspiration, and with the assistance of some outside resources, WinterFresh Trivia night was born!

So, mark your calendars and start putting your team together for our 10th Annual WinterFresh!

Corporate Teams: Making an Impact Together

YRFN's mission resonates with corporate teams, who generously give their time and resources to support our initiatives.

This year, corporate teams from organizations like Honda, Desjardins and TD Bank have stepped up to support our work. Laura Trinh, Senior Analyst from Desjardins Group shared her team's recent experience:

"*The DAN Network Performance and Business Insights team recently had the rewarding opportunity to volunteer with York Region Food Network, and it was an experience that truly depended on our commitment to giving back to the community we serve. Recognizing the growing need for support amid rising food scarcity, we felt compelled to contribute our time and effort to this vital organization.*

During our day of service, we rolled up our sleeves to help clear the community garden lot, ensuring that the space could continue to thrive and provide fresh produce to those in need. It was gratifying to see how our work could directly impact food access in the area.

Next, we transitioned to packing produce boxes for the outreach program. Working together, we carefully assembled each box, knowing that our efforts would help families facing food insecurity. In the kitchen, we enjoyed making biscuits, bringing a bit of comfort to those in need.

This experience has not only strengthened our team bond but also deepened our commitment to giving back. We look forward to continuing our support for the York Region Food Network and the vital work they do."

Likewise, TD Bank's United Way campaign led them to volunteer with us, helping in the garden and strengthening their connection to our mission. Komal Boodhun, Bilingual Resource Officer shared:

"*Every year TD Bank has a United Way campaign during which it encourages colleagues to contribute to organizations in the community. As part of the campaign, a representative of YRFN spoke to a group of our colleagues and shared about the amazing work being done by the organization to create a positive impact in the community. Therefore, when a team was discussing options to volunteer, we decided to connect with YRFN and volunteer with them. As we know, with the rise in cost of living and other challenges being faced by vulnerable members of the community, work undertaken by YRFN is crucial to provide them with necessities and a sense of hope in the goodness of humanity. We spent a few hours helping in the community garden and all our colleagues were happy to have participated in this project and it motivated many to look for other ways they could help in their community.*"

We're always looking for more corporate teams to join us in making a difference. If your team is interested in getting involved, reach out to joannew@yrfn.ca and let's make an impact together!

GIVING TUESDAY
YOUR CHANCE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

#GivingTuesday was created in 2012 as a simple idea: a day that encourages people to do good. The idea caught on, and has grown around the world, inspiring hundreds of millions of people to give, collaborate and celebrate generosity.

This year for Giving Tuesday on December 3, 2024, York Region Food Network needs your help to reach our end-of-year fundraising goal!

Help us continue to make a difference in York Region by providing essential programs and services.

This holiday season, support folks living with food insecurity and seeking social connection.

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- $5 provides a community member with a complimentary breakfast
- $10 offers a home-cooked meal for a caregiver
- $15 funds a spot in a food-growing workshop
- $25 helps a household access the Affordable Fresh Food Market

Help us give the gift of food and hope this holiday season. Visit our website at www.yrfn.ca and click the donate button!

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR FUNDERS

Bingo World Gaming — Charitable gaming benefits this organization and your community. bingoworld.ca/newmarket

community food centres CANADA — good food is just the beginning

Ontario Trillium Foundation / Fondation Trillium de l'Ontario — An agency of the Government of Ontario / Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Public Health Agency of Canada

Whitchurch-Stouffville Legacy Fund

South Central Richmond Hill Community Action Table

UNFI CANADA — Better food. Better future. | Meilleurs aliments. Meilleur avenir.

United Way Greater Toronto

York Region

Join York Region Food Network's Fundraising Campaign

I support YRFN's work to improve access to fresh food for all people of York Region

I have enclosed my donation of: ☐ $50 ☐ $100 ☐ $250 ☐ Other

Please make cheques payable to York Region Food Network. YRFN will issue a charitable tax receipt for all donations over $25. Registration 87044 7315 RR0001

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

To donate by credit card, visit our website at www.yrfn.ca and click on the DONATE NOW button which will take you to CanadaHelps.org, a secure website where you can make a tax deductible credit card donation to YRFN. Donations can also be mailed to 350 Industrial Pkwy S., Aurora, ON L4G 3V7

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