

City's \$500,000 food 'hamper'

Vouchers issued amid welfare crunch

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The city has invested more than half a million dollars this year to keep its neediest residents fed.

In October, the city spent \$200,000 on food vouchers as part of a pilot program to help curb a crisis in local food banks. These vouchers are being given out to welfare recipients through their case managers, said Gillian Hendry, the city's director of social housing and homelessness.

Since the spring, the city has also spent an additional \$200,000 on food vouchers for welfare recipients who are involved with employment programs.

However, those vouchers are part of a larger package that includes bus passes, phone cards and haircut coupons and aren't directly related to the caseload numbers, Hendry said.

The public health department also dedicated \$40,000 this fall to food vouchers, which will be distributed throughout the year.

Those vouchers will be handed out to participants in public health programming, including parenting groups, teen prenatal classes and mental health outreach clients.

This week, the emergency and community services committee voted to give \$100,000 to Hamilton Food Share for this year's Christmas hampers.

That recommendation will go to council for final approval next Wednesday.

The city has requested \$16.5 million from the province to help offset the costs of social services. However, in light of the province's \$25-billion deficit, Mayor Fred Eisenberger has warned council members to "prepare themselves" for the possibility of being cut out of provincial funding. And even with the contribution from the province, Hamilton still faces a \$13.8-million budget shortfall next year.

Hendry said the decision to purchase \$200,000 worth of vouchers as a pilot project is a direct result of the city's skyrocketing welfare caseload.

There were 12,809 cases in October, a jump from 10,127 cases in October 2008.

"The increased caseload is putting pressure on the city," she said

In order to fund those vouchers, the city is using up its surplus from the employment assistance budget.

These vouchers, which are still available through Ontario Works employees, are being distributed based on need.

Single people are receiving \$50 and families get \$100, though very large families can be given more, Hendry said.

Tom Cooper, director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, said handing out vouchers to help the city's demands is an "innovative approach in the short term." However, he argues the program demonstrates that social assistance rates are too low for many families to make ends meet.

"In a sense it is a Band-Aid solution but it is a necessary one," he said.

"We need to stop the bleeding first before we wheel the person into the operating room and fix the system."

Deirdre Pike of the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton said she's pleased the city is easing the burden on food banks but she's concerned about the way the vouchers are being distributed.

"If it's at the whim of the case managers, how is it fair and equitable?"

Pike also said she's still waiting for a review of social assistance rates the province announced in December 2008.

"The province hasn't come through with the promise," she said.

"Nothing has happened."

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