

Food bank use drops, but hunger remains

BY PAUL MORSE

Hamilton's food banks say they are operating at capacity and going full tilt despite a very small decrease in usage over last year.

This year's Hamilton Hunger Count report, released yesterday on National Hunger Awareness Day, indicates that 5 per cent fewer people went to a local food bank for help this March over last.

But with 18,600 adults and children needing help to put food on the table in March this year, difficulties in feeding hungry Hamiltonians remain.

"This is about capacity issues," said Joanne Santucci, executive director of Hamilton Food Share.

Last Christmas and summer were the most difficult Hamilton's nine food banks have faced over the past four years, she said.

"There was a huge jump of over 26 per cent last year, so I don't think (the decrease) is going to have an easement either way.

"At some points throughout the year, specific agencies are unable to meet the need that is there."

Hamilton's nine food banks reported that last year:

■ 30 per cent ran out of food.

■ 40 per cent gave out less food.

■ 80 per cent had to buy more food.

■ 70 per cent asked churches for help.

■ 50 per cent appealed to corporate partners.

"We know that summer months are a really difficult time, and that slight decrease is not bringing any easement of pressure," Santucci said.

For people struggling to make ends meet, social benefit levels are just too low for them to break the cycle of poverty, she said.

To help drive awareness about hunger, Food Share is asking people to give up one day's lunch this year and donate the money.

Food banks are also looking at new ways to combat hunger, including an innovative direct partnership with farmers growing food.

This year, Hamilton Food Share, with the help of the Ontario Association of Food Banks, has joined with a local organic farmer to cultivate 13 hectares with onions, carrots and potatoes.

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