



Photo by Debra Downey

Shown, Rachel O'Reilly, resource and development director, right, and Joanne Santucci, executive director of Hamilton Food Share.

No child should go to bed hungry

Thousands in our community do

By Debra Downey, Senior Editor

Rachel O'Reilly refers to the Hamilton Food Share warehouse on Barton Street as the "hearth of our home."

This is where it all happens — a whopping 2.3 million pounds of food are collected and then distributed to support nine member agencies who assist more than 18,432 people in the Greater Hamilton area each month.

Through community partnerships, donor relations and fundraising activities, Hamilton Food Share helps reduce hunger in the community by providing food supplies and short-term storage to food banks and hot meal programs.

With a 16,000-square-foot warehouse, complete with an industrial freezer and cooler, Hamilton Food Share can accommodate large volumes of donated product from the food industry, both perishable and non-perishable.

Hamilton Food Share's food recovery program takes healthy and good food deemed surplus and un-salable by industry standards and redirects it onto the tables of the people who need it.

Over the past couple of years, Food Share has also worked to increase fresh food donations.

In 2010, a new program called Hamilton Harvest was introduced to create relationships with the agricultural sector. The result was 90,000 pounds of fresh produce that was distributed through Hamilton Food Share.

Dairy producers and wholesalers also partner with Food Share to provide delicious, nutritious milk donations to the tune of 7,500 litres a month.

O'Reilly said over the past few years little has changed in terms of need in the Hamilton area. A statistical snapshot of food program use during the month of March 2011 shows:

- 7,963 Hamilton households relied on a food bank in March.
- 592 new households accessed a food bank for the first time.
- over 5,000 parents struggle to feed their children every month.
- 46 per cent of people served are children under the age of 18.
- 75 per cent of households count social assistance as their income source.

"The need in the community is high," said O'Reilly.

"Currently we have 18,432 people who rely on a food bank each month just to survive. Will the numbers continue to grow? I wish I could say that the need would be solved, but sadly, in my 10 years at Hamilton Food Share, I have never seen the numbers of people who rely on a food bank ever drop significantly."

Instead, said O'Reilly, she has witnessed a steady increase in need.

"The impact of hunger continues to be a symptom of the deep levels of poverty experienced by the city's most vulnerable residents," said O'Reilly.

Hunger is felt across every age group — affecting children in their development years to seniors. It is felt across every family situation, she said, from people on social assistance and disability, to people working for minimum wage, looking for work or people who have no income at all.

O'Reilly said hunger among children is a critical issue.

Children living in "food insecure" households experience a lack of focus and concentration in school.

Women and children — the largest group living in poverty — are at extreme risk of experiencing adverse health effects due to prolonged states of hunger.

Eighty-one per cent of parents who visit a food bank sacrifice their own food so children can eat, said O'Reilly, but even with this sacrifice, one in five children who are food bank users are going without breakfast or a balanced meal.

December is one of the months when the need at local food banks is greatest. Now is the time to contribute, to say thank you for what you have and lend a hand to those less fortunate. Turn the page to find out where you can drop off donations.

• • •

In order to help close the poverty gap, Hamilton Community News is once again taking up the fight against hunger by teaming up with Hamilton Food Share for a month-long food drive and fundraiser.

Representing the Ancaster News, Dundas Star News, Hamilton Mountain News, Stoney Creek News and the Real Estate News and Buyers Guide, Hamilton Community News and its generous advertisers are spearheading an initiative to fill the shelves at Hamilton Food Share and its food bank affiliates throughout Hamilton.

Get involved and learn more by reading this special feature in the weekly edition of your community newspaper. Look for the food drive drop-off locations and participating businesses.

Together, we can all fight hunger.