

Recession ends, but hunger remains



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Hamilton Spectator

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While summers are historically a slow time for these organizations, gaps in the food-bank system have started appearing sooner in the spring, Hamilton Food Share's resource/development officer, Rachel O'Reilly said.

"The need has grown so much over the last three years that agencies are identifying the gaps (as) being much earlier and that's because the need has increased," she said. "So you can assume that poverty and hunger is the No. 1 issue facing this community and the food banks are in dire need of support 365 days a year."

While economists point to an end of the recession, the untold story is that companies have had to get "leaner and meaner" and the apparent end of a downturn does not translate into jobs, O'Reilly said.

"So from a food-bank perspective, the recession is not over, sadly."

The Neighbour 2 Neighbour Centre has already started purchasing key food items – the earliest it has had to do it in the 18 years executive director Denise Arkell has been with the agency.

She said they normally don't have to buy the food until June. Donations are coming in along the same lines, but the need isn't declining, Arkell said, adding they serve about 1,050 families every month. There was a 20 per cent increase in demand last year that has not declined, Arkell said.

Loblaw Companies Limited launched its 2011 Extra Helping Spring National Food Drive on Friday, which matches eight local Fortinos stores with the Hamilton Food Share and two No Frills stores with Neighbour 2 Neighbour.

The three-week initiative started three years ago and encourages shoppers to drop off non-perishable food items in bins at the stores as well as donate upon checking out.

All of the food items and 70 per cent of the cash donations go to the local food banks, Loblaw's senior director of community investment Peggy Hornell said, adding the other 30 per cent of donated money goes to the Ontario Association of Food Banks' programs that reach local communities.

Donations tend to decline in the summer or from Easter and on, St. Matthew's House executive director Canon Wendy Roy said. "What is much more so this year is that the food dollar doesn't go anywhere near as far because of rising food prices," she said. "Everything is going up and continuing to go up ... Fuel prices have a direct impact on food costs."

Looking at how things are going now, they anticipate they will need to make a big push from Easter and onward, Roy said.

The Good Shepherd Centre had to put out an emergency appeal for its food bank in early March because the shelves were empty and the organization was \$70,000 short of what it needed, said chief development officer Cathy Wellwood.

That target was reached in one month, but the number of mouths to feed has increased in recent years, she said. Wellwood attributed the growing need to a number of factors, such as the loss of jobs and the cost of living.

The local Salvation Army has also had to take on greater demand in the community, seeing about 4,500 individuals use their food banks every month. The agency saw a 42 per cent increase of clients over the past two years. The first quarter of 2011 jumped 8 per cent over the same period last year, spokesperson Major Gary Brown said.

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How To Help:

To donate to the Hamilton Food Share, call 905-664-9065 or give online by visiting hamiltonfoodshare.org.

Food bins will be located at participating No Frills and Fortinos stores in Hamilton where people can donate purchased and non-purchased non-perishable food items.

Donations can also be made upon checking out.