

Hamilton Spectator Article by Jeff Green Oct 8<sup>th</sup> 2011

## When your cupboard is bare

Tierney's kids don't know they eat from a food bank.

In an empty waiting room at one of the city's smallest food banks, the petite North End resident towed a Fisher Price wheelbarrow and sat patiently for a minimum three-day supply of food. It would feed seven kids and two adults.

"It's not something a parent wants their kids to worry about," she says shyly. Tierney turns to food banks when her shelves are lean. Asked if she'll ever tell her kids, tears well up in her eyes.

"Eventually."

Leaving her, I sat in my car for a minute to digest what I had just asked.

It was one of the first times all week I didn't think about food.

I was one of more than 100 people who participated in a poverty experiment — a weeklong trial of living on a food bank hamper organized by the McMaster Community Poverty Initiative.

Whether it was supposed to imitate real poverty or real hunger became irrelevant to me when I asked Tierney how long she'd been visiting food banks.

*Fifteen years.* Since the 31-year-old was first a mother. Her oldest is 15. Her youngest is two.

I declared at the onset of this experiment that I'd never been hungry.

It was an honest and personal statement, one meant to tell you who I was before I started. I wasn't going to pretend that I was going to experience real hunger — and after five days, I never did.

For me, the carrot at the end of the stick was Thanksgiving. I could suppress the glutton inside of me for five days, and know that my diet would return to its normal mix of fast food, barbecue and pasta. Turkey day was my trophy.

In Hamilton alone, there are 18,600 people that use a food bank supplied by the Hamilton Food Share every month. More than 8,000 of them are under 18 years old.

Of the people who use food banks, 72 per cent are on social assistance through disability support (20 per cent) or Ontario Works (52 per cent). A report to Hamilton city council on Sept. 26 shared those details, as well as a breakdown displaying the disparity between social assistance and costs of living in the city.

Prepared by the public health department, they're calling on the city to advocate for "adequate income levels" to allow people to buy nutritious food.

Most people know Hamilton has its fair share of people who struggle to put food on the table after the bills are paid. But one number stood out: 5,743. It's the number of people on a waiting list for affordable social housing in Hamilton. It's at a four-year high.

I was supplied with breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks for three days, and had to stretch that supply for five. I could use pantry items such as flour, oil, coffee and tea, but no additional rice or pasta. It was given to me by the McMaster Community Poverty Initiative as part of the Do the Math challenge. They're advocating for an immediate \$100 a month increase to social assistance to help cover living costs.

The food was yellow and white, right down to the packaging. Starches, broth and powdered cheese, but sufficient according to Jennifer Holterman, a registered dietitian in Hamilton.

The real challenge, she said, is knowing how to combine them to make it healthy.

"What's missing is the fresh fruit and fresh vegetables," Holterman said.

And I certainly didn't get any. I ran through the soups and mac 'n' cheese, but never combined them with anything else. The first day was easy — getting used to the lack of Coke and available coffee was the biggest shock.

Holterman works with diabetics who use food banks as a main source of food. She asks them to fill half their plate with vegetables. Half my plate was usually a slice of toast.

I forgot to plan a lunch on Tuesday, but ran home for a quick meal because I could. I made tuna cakes that lasted two meals, but never really combined anything else. The rest of the week was a steady decline in energy and planning. I mostly ate bread, beans and mac 'n' cheese, and I don't want to eat them again for weeks.

On Tuesday, The Good Shepherd was able to hand out five days of supplies. On Wednesday, Mission Services was handing out fresh vegetables, and the Welcome Inn food bank was giving a whole bag of carrots and potatoes for a single person.

"When we have it, we give it out," says Melanie Haworth, a food bank co-ordinator with the Welcome Inn.

"It could be three to four months before we get this again," added volunteer co-ordinator Claudine Pitre.

That's the fear that I never had throughout the week. I knew I was going to eat. I knew at the end of the week I was going to gorge. I couldn't block that out of my mind because I always had that choice.

I never had to line up at a food bank, saving myself the humiliation or shame I imagined I would have felt. I made light of it at work, in videos and in tweets.

It never really sank in until I asked Tierney how long she'd been using food banks. She doesn't have a choice. I never experienced that, and I never want to.

Robert and his mom are both on social assistance. She's on Ontario Works and he uses the disability support program.

He volunteers at the Welcome Inn four days a week, and says that by the time the bills are paid, they have \$200 left over for the month.

They live off the food bank and when they can't, they turn to hot meal programs.

"It's a hot meal and social time but it's kind of a hurt to your pride because you don't have food at home," says Robert. "Lately it's been a struggle."

I have to admit, I cheated three times. I had a slice of processed cheese on the first day, ate election-night pizza in the newsroom and drank beer.

I lost six pounds and tightened my belt a notch. I was grumpy, tired and my editor thought I was spaced out mid-week.

After the weeklong trial, I can tell you it's not food you can function on and since I never experienced real hunger or poverty, I was barely a witness. When it was over, I simply got in my car and drove home.

### **Before and after**

The three-day supply of food was not taken from a food bank, and was purchased by the McMaster Community Poverty Initiative. It's intended to replicate what a food bank hamper would look like.

### **What I started with:**

2 boxes of mac 'n' cheese

2 cans of chicken noodle soup

2 cans of creamed corn

1 can of beans

2 tins of tuna

3 packages of instant oatmeal

1 cup of rice

3 granola bars

3 juice boxes

3 small onions

4 small potatoes

1 loaf of bread

1 quart of milk

### **What's left at the end of five days?**

2 cans of creamed corn

1 tin of tuna

1 package of instant oatmeal

1/2 cup of rice

2 small onions

2 small potatoes

### **How to help**

Any donation, food or financial, is welcome at the Hamilton Food Share, which feeds multiple food banks across the city. You can drop off non-perishables at the Food Share warehouse at:

339 Barton St. E.

Warehouse hours: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., weekdays

Or contact: Mona Santucci, warehouse manager,

905-664-9065, ext. 233

[mona@hamiltonfoodshare.org](mailto:mona@hamiltonfoodshare.org)

### **Nutritious Food Basket Report**

Nutrition is out of reach to those on social assistance, according to a report from Hamilton Public Health Services.

The annual Nutritious Food Basket report is calling for policy changes that would put in an evidence-based system to set yearly rates.

“The food that’s available isn’t necessarily the most healthy food,” said Tom Cooper, director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. “That’s going to have a cost on those folks as individuals and their personal health.”

Coinciding with the food basket report is a proposal that would provide \$20 gift certificates to the Hamilton Farmers' Market for those on assistance.

Cooper says the two ideas arrived separately, but the farmers' market certificate is something that Hamilton can do locally while advocating for a change to provincial assistance programs.

The report estimates the average cost to buy healthy food in Hamilton is \$166 per week for a family of four. Cooper says that families in need of assistance don't have the funds to afford that much for food.

Only nine per cent of people who access the food bank list employment as a source of income. Seventy-two per cent of food bank users are on Ontario Works or disability assistance, which is why the reform is focused on assistance rates.