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## **Food banks face crunch as donations shrink**

*Non-profits forced to buy more, ask for help, cut hamper size*

By Richard Matern

A few mothers who have recently come into the Good Shepherd's food bank in Hamilton, Ont., looking for baby formula have been leaving empty-handed.

"It's quite stressful," said manager Christina Ferguson. "If you send the mother away without the proper food, we're actually saying to them, 'You're going to go home and your child may starve'."

The southern Ontario food bank, which helped over 40,000 people last year, is not alone.

- **Ontario food bank use near record level**
- **800,000 Canadians still rely on food banks**

In the past year, more than a third of the 1,300 food banks surveyed by Food Banks Canada cut the amount of sustenance doled out to the country's most needy because their supplies fell short.

Feed Nova Scotia says the province saw a fairly steady flow of donations, but was hard hit during the cold winter months, particularly in March.

"It can also be a month when you have more people are at your door because they're trying to stretch their dollars to include heat and other things," said Dianne Swinemar, executive director of Feed Nova Scotia.

### **Feeling the squeeze**

Food banks across the country struggled with insufficient donations, plus the added crunch of high demand that's continued unabated since the 2008 recession.

One in 10 ran out of food at some point, according to the recently published report.

"There's a number of ways that they're trying to manage that increased load," said Katharine Schmidt, executive director of Food Banks Canada.

A number of food banks surveyed bought more food than usual to try to keep up, while a few dealt with the crunch by contacting other food banks for help. A small portion — about one in 20 — turned people away.

Some say fewer donations from food manufacturers, typically large suppliers of fresh and canned goods, is putting a dent in their stocks.

The food industry often donates cast-offs, such as excess stock or salvaged food that is safe to eat but unsuitable for sale due to errors in the labelling process.

However, the food industry is currently feeling heightened pressure to squeeze out more profit and improve operational efficiency due to increasing competition, said Joanne Santucci, executive director at Hamilton Food Share.

Santucci said that affects the amount of food donations her organization gets.

“It seems to be, whatever they can get, rather than lose it totally, some of that stuff now goes into liquidation when it used to go to the food bank,” said Santucci.

Individual donors — another key source of funds and food — also gave less in recent months, affected by the same economic realities as corporations, some food banks say.

“Some people who used to donate to us are not,” said Ferguson. “So if our clients are being affected by the higher bills, so are people who would to donate to us.”

### **Thinking of others**

Meanwhile, the need for food banks across Canada remains 23 per cent higher than before the recession of 2008, which equals an increase of 157,000 people, said the food banks report.

But this past year, Calgary stood out as an anomaly. Among the hardest hit provinces in the past years has been Alberta and Manitoba, which saw their need increase by nearly 50 per cent. Those rises in demand have left food banks scrambling to cope.

Food banks there say they received more donations than usual from both individuals and corporations thanks to an outpouring after the June 20 flood devastated the city and surrounding communities.

“When the flood came, a lot more people focused on Calgary,” said James McAra, CEO of Calgary Food Bank.

Since the food bank already had a distribution structure in place, they became the go-to place for corporate donations to help those left homeless by the flood. It also helped bring in donations in the months that followed.

Making donors take notice is extremely important for food banks as only a few receive government funding. Most rely entirely on donations.

<b>Food banks that cut hamper size</b>	
B.C.	35%
Alta.	29%
Sask.	25%
Man.	50%
Ont.	45%
Que.	31%
N.B.	25%
N.S.	33%
P.E.I.	33%
N.L.	28%
<i>Source: Food Banks Canada 2013 report</i>	

The holiday season typically brings an upsurge in donations across the country as Canadians open their wallets.

“This time of year is the time you think about other people,” said Swinemar.

But Swinemar and many others worry most about the hard winter that follows.

“The challenge is after Christmas,” said Swinemar.

*Richard Matern wrote this feature as part of his global journalism fellowship at the University of Toronto’s Munk School of Global Affairs. He works at Toronto’s Daily Bread Food Bank as the senior manager of research. The views in this article do not represent those of Daily Bread Food Bank.*