

2008 Hunger Count

The Perpetual Problem of Hunger in Waterloo Region

“It shouldn’t be this hard”

Wednesday November 26, 2008

12:00pm – 4:30pm

12:00 - St. John’s Anglican Church – Cambridge

2:00 - Sunnydale Community Centre – Waterloo

4:00 - Wilmot Family Resource Centre – New Hamburg

Speakers

Wendi Campbell – Executive Director – The Food Bank of Waterloo Region

Pat Singleton – Executive Director – Cambridge Self Help Food Bank

Brice Balmer – ISARC

Trisha Robinson – Wilmot Family Resource Centre

Matthew Cooper – House of Friendship

Good Afternoon

We join our partners across Canada today for the release of the annual Hunger Count report. The Hunger Count is a national survey coordinated by Food Banks Canada that provides data about food bank and meal program use in Canada.

This afternoon we will be sharing with you the annual Hunger Count for Waterloo Region.

The Hunger Count is a snapshot of emergency food use in our community.

It is a snapshot of the struggles that families go through to make ends meet everyday.

It is a snapshot of the work of the Food Assistance Network...over 100 social service agencies and food programs that provide essential services and basic needs everyday in our community.

It is a snapshot of the work we need to do in the future that will allow our community to live in dignity and enjoy a good standard of living.

We will begin today by giving you an overview of emergency food usage across Waterloo Region.

We will then break it down and show you how services impact Cambridge & North Dumfries (Kitchener/Waterloo, Our Rural Communities of Woolwich, Wilmot, Wellesley).

We will hear the stories of those who have been affected by hunger and start to think about how we can all work together to bring hope to thousands of individuals and families in our community.

Finally we will call our community to action – and show how we can support a poverty free Ontario.

This afternoon's event is one of 3 that will take place throughout Waterloo Region today as we illustrate the complexity of this issue and how it affects our cities, towns, villages and rural communities.

Last year 59,416 food hampers were distributed in Waterloo Region. It is estimated that 25,000 different people lived in the households that received these hampers – 25,000 people who required emergency food assistance in order to have the basic need of food met in their daily lives.

Our annual survey includes data on the source of income in each household that is accessing service. In 2007:

21.3% were working full or part time – for the most part a minimum wage job that does not provide an adequate income to provide for a family or to have a buffer in your bank account to handle unexpected emergencies or expenses.

4.1 % were unemployed – having recently lost their jobs and now accessing EI.

33.7 % were accessing Ontario Works – A social program that has its own set of challenges and complexities that make it very challenging for individuals to break the cycle.

3.5% were seniors on fixed income pensions who see fuel and food costs rising without the income to compensate.

15.6% were accessing ODSP – a disability has prevented them from working and government assistance is the only option.

5.9% reported no income – no government, employment or family support – most often waiting weeks and even months for government programs to decide if they're eligible for some form of assistance – and forced to rely on the generosity of the community to make ends meet.

Members of our community who are accessing food services are individuals – adults and children who have a wide variety of life situations which have led them to the doors of our agencies and programs. 25.7% are living in single parent families, 30% are two parent families, 6.7% are couples with no children and 37.6% are single.

For many in our community, the preparation of food is also a challenge. Whether they are living in a rooming house with no kitchen facilities, in a shelter or residential program or on the streets – these individuals have the same food and nutritional requirements with fewer resources to meet that need. Last year shelter, residential and community meal programs served 380, 841 meals in our community.

In a prosperous community that despite strains on the global economy still boasts one of the highest unemployment rates in the country – we still must collect and distribute over 4 million pounds of food a year to help feed our community.

Hunger is a complex issue and it has been with us since the founding of this community. There have always been a few individuals and families who have fallen through the cracks. Unemployment has always pushed some into poverty. However, the statistics we are discussing today show that we are not talking about a few families or a few isolated individuals. What they show is that year after year we have been helping over 20,000 people. What they show is that each year we see new faces in the lineups at our agencies. They show that hundreds of people each day are hungry in our community and unsure of where their next meal will come from. This is not new to us. We have seen little change over the last 15 years. In that time we have been from economic crisis to boom twice and seen little change in the level of service we have had to provide. This is a complicated issue, but clearly something isn't working.

Today as we travel through Waterloo Region we will highlight some of the complexities. I would like to introduce Matthew Cooper, Program Supervisor at the House of Friendship to talk to us a little bit about the realities and complexities that exist in Kitchener/Waterloo.

Good afternoon. My name is Matt Cooper, I work for the House of Friendship and I coordinate its Emergency Food Hamper Program. Food Hampers is one of the 18 programs offered by the House of Friendship. We operate several programs including community centers, addiction treatment programs, a shelter for Homeless men, an appliance repair program among others.

The Emergency Food Hamper Program is Kitchener Waterloo's largest direct distributor of Emergency Food. We are a member agency of FBWR, who warehouses and ships to us over 1 million pounds of food a year which we in turn distribute to families and individuals in need.

We provide boxes of food intended to last an individual or family approximately 3-5 days. They are usually a mix of perishable and non-perishable food items, which try to follow the guidelines for nutritious eating as set out by Health Canada.

On average we have distributed around 27,000 food hampers each of the last five years to approximately 8500-9000 households. This year we're on track to distribute over 28,000 hampers. A third of our caseload are children 13 years or younger.

When surveyed our patrons cited the following as the major contributing factors leading them to rely on a food bank: family breakdown (41%) unemployment (77%), lack of affordable housing (59%), insufficient fixed income (55%) and a medical condition/poor health (37%).

These are people who want to work full time jobs, who feel a sting of shame every time they walk into our program. They have exhausted all other options of support... run up debt, borrowed from family, used up savings. These are people who in the past would have benefited from some form of government support, but those supports are no longer there or greatly reduced. These are people who in days gone by would have been able to focus on finding work, but instead have to go from one crisis to another. Because their social assistance cheque is barely enough to cover their rent, they have to spend their time in lineups to busy programs like ours. They have to arrange childcare with friends and neighbours so they can walk to the food bank. They are consumed by stress and anxiety because their heating bill was too much because their rental apartment has inefficient electric heat. They have to cut into their already pinched food budget to pay it or risk getting disconnected and then evicted.

We see the full spectrum of people and situations. Some only need to visit our program once, before they are able to get back on their feet. Often, they will come back and donate money or food or time. However, when asked, a significant proportion of our patrons stated that they have been forced to rely on food assistance programs regularly during the last five years (50%) and are forced to visit them some, most or every month in order to feed themselves and their families.

We live in a generous community. It is truly humbling to see the extent of that generosity. However, when asked, most (over 57%) of our patrons stated that they require more food than we are able to provide.

And, we are not exceptional. These numbers and scenarios are reflected across the Province and the entire country. We are all local responses to a national problem. At our program alone, we have distributed over 21000 emergency food hampers each year since 1991.

Thanks Matt

Today as we travel through the Region of Waterloo we have attempted to show the complexity of this perpetual problem in our community – a problem that is not defined by urban or rural residence, employment or unemployment, or personal attributes. It is a problem that has the potential to touch all of our lives and the lives of our neighbours.

There is no one solution to eliminating hunger and poverty. We cannot solve it over night. It is a journey that begins with a food assistance network providing a basic need – to keep people healthy today, tomorrow and next week.

The Food Assistance Network is committed to supporting and advocating with Food Banks Canada, the Ontario Association of Food Banks, and other partners to provide solutions that will improve the lives of the less fortunate in our community.

It shouldn't be this hard.

Families in our communities should not have to piece together part time and seasonal work in order to earn a full time sustainable income. Individuals should not have to piece together multiple government programs to make ends meet. People should be able to go to a grocery store and make choices instead of relying on food hampers to survive. Food Banks are no ones first choice.

Today we thank our community for their continued support of the work we do – because we need to make sure that people have food today, tomorrow and next week to keep them healthy and able to move on to a better place.

While you are helping us meet basic needs – we also ask for your support – have your voice heard by endorsing 25 in 5 so that we can continue to ask our provincial and national leaders to make change to make a difference.