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Food Pantry seeks summer solution for students in need



By Brock Weir

Each year, the Aurora Food Pantry serves approximately 250 children and teens whose families know that, in many cases, their hardships in providing healthy meals to their kids will be eased somewhat during the school year thanks to in-school meal and snack programs.

But what happens to these kids and teens over the summer months when school is out and these programs are dormant through September?

The Aurora Food Pantry is looking to provide an answer ? all they need is a professional kitchen and some space.

The local food bank is hoping to hit the ground running on a new food program as soon as school lets out for summer to provide hot child-friendly meals for children, accompanied by an adult, at least three times a week while, at the same time, helping families make ends meet at mealtimes over the weekend.

?Last summer, at the eleventh hour, we had a penny-dropping moment,? explains Allison Stuart, Board Chair of the Aurora Food Pantry. ?What do kids do if they have been able to take advantage of snack programs at school? When school is out, neither formal nor informal programs are available to kids and to the families. We purchased some extra food to give to families with school-age children, put them in a bag, enough to make a couple of lunches.

?But,? she says, ?it was really last minute. We started doing a bit of research and decided to try and do a program this summer that was a little bit more focused on the child and would be, as my daughter used to say, ?more funner' than simply getting some food in a bag.?

Enter the School's Out program.

Aurora Food Pantry brainstormed a number of options, wanting a program that was manageable, but there were very few templates out there for them to rely upon. Programs stemming out of the United States, for instance, were too formal in many cases and presented some logistical concerns.

?Our idea is we could use a professional kitchen in, say, one of the churches or other centres that has one, that might not be active during the summer to provide a hot child-friendly meal for a child ? plus an adult, because we can't become a babysitting service ? three days a week and then, two days a week, provide them with something they can take home.?

That's not all. To give it some ?more funner' street cred, they hope to bring in some entertainment such as a musician or singer to give it an atmosphere ? but without a kitchen, the program itself could fall through the cracks.

?We have to find a site because this is not the site,? says Ms. Stuart of their Industrial Parkway South facility they share with the York Region Food Network, as well as community groups Big Brothers Big Sisters of York and Hospice King Aurora. ?We have to find something accessible. Something in Central Aurora would be really good. Part of the challenge of that, of course, is I live in Old Aurora so my idea of ?central' is around the Town Park area, but I am sure from a demographic point-of-view, ?Central Aurora' is not there anymore!

?We need good advice on where it should be. Churches are one group we will be pursing because they are there, but maybe there are

other sites more accessible.?
When they get the program off the ground ? and they still hope to hit the ground running come July ? the summer initiative will be open throughout the summer to registered clients of the Aurora Food Pantry. Currently serving 600 family groups, this breaks down to 250 Food Pantry clients between the ages of zero and 18.
Once the groundwork is completed, there will be new volunteer opportunities to take the initiative the rest of the way.
?We're going to need more adult volunteers to help with the program itself because if we're running three days a week we're going to need people for each of them,? says Ms. Stuart. ?We're also going to need people who know how to cook for a crowd and provide entertainment.
?This isn't a ?send your kid to the park with a free lunch for all families' program. This is focused on people who are hungry and in need. It is going to be really great and I think the kids are going to think it is fun ? and that is a really important feature of this!?