

Food advocates decide it's time to consider other options on the shelf

By **Brittany Spencer**

Community members, food advocates, nutrition experts and local food bank users came together last week to discuss the provocative question of whether or not local food banks are 'past their best before date.'

The consensus was a resounding and firm 'yes.'

Leading the discussion was a panel of experts including Tracy Woloshyn, a registered dietician with York Region Public Health; Kristine Carbis, poverty advocate and community organizer with the food bank organization Freedom 90; and Louise Moody, the Executive Director of CRC and the Regent Park Community Food Centre.

Opening the discussion, Joan Stonehocker, Executive Director of the York Region Food Network, claimed she has grown 'impatient with the changes that we do, or don't, see in our community surrounding hunger and poverty and it's time to get provocative.'

'There have been a lot of things that have gotten us to this place and now moving on is what we need to think about,' she said.

Woloshyn, a ten-year member of the York Region Food Advisory Board, addressed the panel with a discussion of 'food insecurity' within York Region, which she defined as 'the insecure access to adequate food due to financial constraints.'

Research from the Canadian Community Health Survey conducted in 2012 found over 571,000 households in Ontario are classified as food insecure. Additional data indicated youth and adults residing in food insecure households are 'statistically more likely to be hospitalized; to be diagnosed with iron deficiency, anemia, asthma and diabetes; and to develop mental and behavioral problems.'

Carbis further contextualized food insecurity in Ontario, indicating that only 20-25 percent of people classified as food insecure actually utilize the food bank and its services due to issues of accessibility, social stigma, and restrictive eligibility criteria enforced to cope with a limited supply of resources.

Despite this small ratio, the demand for food bank services is still high and 'if everyone who needed the food bank used it, food banks would be overwhelmed and unable to meet these needs.'

'Every year, more people are coming to food banks and emergency meal programs - more than 400,000 households per month,' said Carbis. 'Food banks were originally started to fill the need for emergency situations; now it's not an emergency. It is now a necessity for many individuals and families that access food banks on a regular basis. However, food banks and emergency meal programs do not, and never will, meet the basic needs of people in our communities of lower incomes.'

Despite these statistics, the panelists said they remain hopeful that effective change is possible and claim that tangible action plans are beginning to gain traction.

Tracy explained that food insecurity researchers are looking past food banks for a solution and toward specific public policy directions to address the root of problems of poverty in local communities.

Researchers are exploring existing systems of guaranteed annual income, such as the Old Age Security (OAS) pension granted to people once they reach the age of 65, as models for a sustainable solution to the overall food insecurity problem in Ontario.

Data from the Canadian Community Health Survey shows once low-income seniors become eligible for OAS, the rate of food insecurity among this group drops from 22.8 to 11.5 percent.

From this, Tracy suggested 'defining the benefit eligibility for the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and OAS Federal Pension

Benefit based solely on income and not on income and age?, a position that found favour from the other panelists.

?This would be the kind of improvement to our social safety net that could be our contribution to the people who have fought for policies like Medicare and public education and all the things that we so greatly benefit from today?, she claimed.

The panel agreed it is important to also focus on education towards food charity and insecurity, underscoring that does not necessitate emergency food programs.

Petlyn Small, a Newmarket resident and food bank user, has focused her attention toward these goals.

?It's a very personal message to everyone, especially to people who are living with food insecurity like myself?, Ms. Small said.

?This takes a group of people who are willing to sacrifice and willing to be vulnerable for the good of other people and together we can make a difference.?

As an active participant of the Newmarket Community Garden project, she encourages the merging of people in need who bring a diverse array of skills and knowledge to projects of food production as progress toward a sustainable alternative to dependency upon food bank services.

?Our intention is not to go out and shut down food banks,? concluded Stonehocker. ?Our intention is to say why are they here and how do we move beyond this. After 30 years of food banks functioning as an emergency food supply, surely we have the brains and the will within our communities to make a difference and make a change.?