

Fall Food Drive Challenge helps local food banks and donors alike

Thanksgiving has come and gone and, if you're like many families across the community, you're probably still figuring out what to do with all that leftover turkey.

Sadly, many other families are not as fortunate and have to rely on local food banks and pantries to make ends meet in putting food on the table.

To address the food crunch into the fall, Neighbourhood Network, which serves northern York Region, is stepping up with their Fall Food Drive, a great way to not only stock shelves but, for students, to collect community service hours in the process.

“Last year, we were forced to not have an in-person event where we would go to grocery stores within every municipality and collect all the food as people came in and out,” says Tanya Dennis of Neighbourhood Network. “Adjusting our food drive ended up being a positive thing for us because now we can list all of the needs from our partnered food banks and food pantries [online] and we're really promoting it for students as a way to collect their volunteer hours. All they need to do is look at the list and collect a few items. They don't have to spend a certain amount, just whatever they feel comfortable doing. They can take it to their food bank, donate it, and along the way take pictures for social media.

“It's just so accessible to everyone, not just students but community members. They can do it on their own time, and it is just not a one-time event.”

Donated food items, she adds, must not be expired as handling goods that are past their Best Before dates simply creates extra work for the food banks in disposing of them.

As the autumn sets in, Ms. Dennis says she and the Neighbourhood Network team are noticing a few common requests amongst all food banks and food pantries, including personal hygiene items like toothbrushes, tooth paste, and deodorant. Staples like peanut butter and canned tuna are also on all lists, along with kids' snacks for school lunches like granola bars, apple sauce and fruit cups.

“The Food Bank of York Region is asking for gluten-free and sugar-free options and meal replacements,” she notes. “The Mount Albert Food Pantry is looking for Kraft Dinner and Sidekicks. There are very specific requests on every single wish list and then there are things that are just so common and always needed.

“The pandemic has been very stressful and created food insecurities for more people, more families. People always think to give during the holidays, but it is something that is always a continuous need.”

And it is a need that students are always welcome to help alleviate.

“When you start something new, you don't know how it is going to happen because when we did our day of pick-up [in our previous food drives] we saw items being donated and it is really powerful to see those images. [Moving away from in-person] we're still getting such great feedback. It takes us out of the middle” and is providing this experience for the person who is giving or donating.

“Sometimes students do this multiple times and they send along the receipt to show us where they went shopping, the day, the time, and, as always, verification from a parent is needed. We do see the same people donating, which is nice, because it means it is a meaningful experience. If we see them doing it multiple times, it is amazing and maybe it is something they will continue doing.

“Gift cards and cash are king because [clients] can buy items as needed, but I think encouraging students and community members to do their own donating, we're giving them that sense of gratification and there are positive feelings that come along when you're giving back to the community.”

Neighbourhood Network's Fall Food Drive Community Challenge benefits the Aurora Food Pantry, Food Bank of York Region, King Township Food Bank, Georgina Community Food Pantry, Newmarket Food Pantry and the Whitchurch-Stouffville Food Bank.

For more information, visit neighbourhoodnetwork.org.

The Challenge runs through December 31, 2021.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter