

Food Network increases awareness of programs with a hand from OTF

Like so many organizations serving the community, the York Region Food Network saw a significant uptick in demand for the services they provide ? including meal programs and food boxes.

It was a challenging time as they redirected and refocused, but an \$86,900 Resilient Communities Fund grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) not only helped them rebuild and recover from the impact of COVID, but help set a course for the future.

The grant was formally recognized at the York Region Food Network's (YRFN) hub on Industrial Parkway South last week as representatives from the OTF and representatives from Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa came together to underscore the important work the money has helped facilitate.

Grant dollars went towards the YRFN developing a new strategic plan, the development of toolkits to help steer programs, and hire a staff member to ?build and animate a fundraising plan.?

?Food is joy. It brings people together. It puts a smile on one's face. It's a vital element of celebrations and get togethers. It's integral to our culture and our social connections,? says the YRFN. ?But in York Region, one in seven households, including 25,000 children, are experiencing food insecurity. This doesn't just mean that 15 per cent of our population is going without food. It means that the physical health of a good portion of the population is suffering. Tens of thousands of York Region residents are experiencing the mental health impacts of living with food insecurity, including chronic worry, anxiety, stress and depression, and social isolation.?

YRFN Executive Director Kate Greavette added that COVID was not the only factor that challenged the organization in recent years; the aftermath of the pandemic ? including increased social isolation and the cost-of-living crisis ? has been a recipe for demand.

?This Resilient Grant from the OTF has been a gamechanger for York Region Food Network, helping us develop a new strategic plan and supporting toolkits, and supporting us in developing a fundraising strategy that has allowed us to build new relationships in the community, generate awareness about the organization, and diversify our revenue streams so we can better meet the needs of our communities.?

Joanne Witt, the YRFN's Director of Fund Development, says organizations like this receive nothing in government funding unless they apply for specific grants. Fundraising is therefore huge, she says, in generating the revenue to keep their myriad programs and services up and running.

?A good example is our community breakfast program, which is probably our most used program in that every Tuesday morning we have free breakfast available to residents of York Region,? says Witt. ?Right now, it is at our location in Aurora, but we're hoping down the road, like some of our other programs, we're starting to find community partners in other municipalities to be able to help serve people there in their communities.?

Such expansion has recently occurred in the distribution of their Good Food Box, which provides fresh food to clients and their families. Originally an initiative that was centered in Aurora for creation and distribution, the YRFN will soon have a location in Georgina where these boxes are put together on the morning of and available for pickup in the afternoon.

?We still have time to make all the Good Food Boxes in the morning and staff or volunteers are now taking them to locations like Stouffville and Richmond Hill so people can have them closer to where they live,? says Witt. ?Hopefully one day we're going to be able to do that with a lot of our other programs, including the breakfast program so people have a gathering space.?

The community breakfast program started more as a socialization program as well for people who are dealing with food insecurity,

she notes, adding, ?It's a place where they can come, they would just talk, and it created kind of a café atmosphere where people could come and eat, make new friends and feel less isolated.?

?Last week, we had Mayor Mrakas come in and see the program because we recently received \$5,000 from the Mayor's Charity Golf Classic. When COVID hit and the numbers went from 25-ish people before COVID to closer to 200 people getting breakfasts from us every week, the cost for us has gone up. For the month, usually it is about \$5,000 for the food, the packaging, all of that is staff time. Tom saw exactly what the money was being used for, who we were supporting and being able to take advantage of this program we have. Being able to raise money to keep that program going, for me, has been fantastic because I get to see every week just how necessary it is.?

Following the recognition event, MPP Parsa hailed the contributions from the OTF and how they have been used by the YRFN thus far.

?I am immensely proud to witness the positive impact of the Resilient Communities Fund grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation on the York Region Food Network,? he said. ?The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges relating to food security, leading to increased demand for essential services provided by the York Region Food Network. The grant's support has been transformative, enabling the organization to rebuild and recover from the pandemic's effects.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter