

## Food organization call on all levels of government to take action on affordability



September is Hunger Action Month and community organizations related to food insecurity are calling on all levels of government to take action after "alarm bells" were sounded in a new study.

Last week, data released by Feed Ontario, a province-wide collective of hunger-relief organizations, released new data that showed more than 1 million people in Ontario accessed food banks in the last year alone, visiting associated organizations more than 7.6 million times.

"That's something that is very, very alarming and when you look at our data, we know the primary reasons folks are accessing food banks are because housing costs are too high, because they can't access quality employment or enough income or support for people to afford the cost of living," says Amanda King, Senior Director of Network Services for Feed Ontario.

King visited the Aurora Food Pantry on Industrial Parkway South on Friday afternoon to deliver this message to a host of local leaders, including MPPs Dawn Gallagher Murphy (Newmarket-Aurora) and Michael Parsa (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), and Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Amid shelves that are becoming increasingly sparse due to both an increase in demand and a decrease in donations due to rising costs, King and Feed Ontario led the lawmakers through a series of scenarios, each reflecting the circumstances of different clients who come through food banks "from seniors trying to make it on a fixed income to a single dad who can only get by for himself and his son through a payday loan.

"Think about all the challenges that you face, even in your own family, or your own health or your own life and then try to do it without money, or without a job," said King at the conclusion of the presentation.

Speaking to The Auroran, King said she wanted to drive home some key recommendations to policy makers.

First and foremost, she said, is more investments into affordable, social, and supportive housing, along with bolstered protection for tenants. Further investments, she said, need to be made in fostering "quality jobs."

"Not only ensuring there are jobs available, but that those jobs are providing a living wage, supports and benefits that really help people," King said, adding investments into social assistance programs as the third pillar of her recommendations.

‘We’re hoping the new data this week is not just raising alarm bells, but that it is a call to action,’ she said. ‘It is a very significant problem when 1 million people can’t afford enough food to eat and that is something that should be alarming to our policy-makers, it should be alarming for the people of Ontario, and it’s something we are calling for action on’ from municipal, provincial, and federal governments. All three levels of government have a role to play.’

The data presented by Feed Ontario is not far removed from the usage being seen specifically at the Aurora Food Pantry. Sandra Seepaul, Executive Director of the Aurora Food Pantry, said the organization is now seeing anywhere between 405 and 420 families per month, or 1,200 unique individuals. In 2022, by contrast, they saw an average of 200 families monthly, or 600 unique visitors.

‘When we are looking at our numbers, we understand the cost of food has increased significantly, we know that affects our clients and people who used to donate no longer can donate,’ said Seepaul. ‘We know that they are stretched themselves, so now they have become our clients instead. That is not an uncommon conversation for us to have with people. They feel ashamed for having to use the food bank now because at one point they were donating to the food bank and definitely the cost of food has impacted that, the cost of rent, the cost of renegotiating your mortgage has increased, and’ all these things impact to the point where our numbers have increased, our donations have decreased, and it just makes it a lot harder for us to do our job well.’

Seepaul said she agrees with efforts to raise minimum wage to a living wage and increase wraparound supports, and said she hoped Friday’s session turned leaders’ attention to ‘what happens in their constituents’ day-to-day lives.’

‘It’s quite clear from the presentation that there are many people, not just across the Province, but in the community, struggling to make ends meet,’ said Mayor Mrakas. ‘I think it is the role of all levels of government to come together and see what we can do to help not only provide opportunities from a housing perspective, but from a job perspective, and increase those opportunities for members of our communities so they are not struggling as much and provide those social safety nets that are much-needed.’ There are limits on what a municipality can do on its own, he added, but said the Town has done its utmost to promote the Food Pantry at every opportunity. He also called on the Federal government to take a closer look at the housing front.

‘We need the Federal government to start looking at social housing again,’ he said. ‘We (the municipality) can approve the applications, we can get through the system quicker, and we can start looking at having appropriate housing in our community and a diverse housing stock.’

The Town’s upcoming Affordable Housing Action Plan is a key driver in this, he added, and, economically, the Town can ‘provide opportunities to entice new businesses (into Aurora) that can provide good-paying jobs for residents in the community.’

MPP Gallagher Murphy said it is a ‘complex issue’ with many components to examine.

‘When I think about the big picture, [it’s] how can we do things that we’re already trying to do, like One Fare to reduce the cost of transit,’ she said. ‘We can see that is a cost for people. We’re trying to reduce the cost of gasoline, but sometimes people have to go to transit. We have increased the ODSP but there is more work to be done. I think my takeaway [from Friday’s session] is to really speak to different Ministries to understand what more can we do as a province to help people at this time because it is complex. We are a government that deals with complex issues every day. I believe that with some good discussions we can see what else can happen.’

**By Brock Weir**