

Food Pantry branches out into the community thanks to a hand from local woodworkers



The holidays are a period of significantly high demand for the Aurora Food Pantry.

But, thanks to a helping hand from the woodworkers at the Aurora Seniors' Centre, the local food bank is ready to make further inroads into neighbourhoods with community food cupboards set to be installed in several locations across Town.

Woodworkers have been diligently working on the mini-pantries throughout the summer and fall and, this week, the results are set to be installed at Town Hall, the Aurora Community Centre, and outside the Aurora Food Pantry itself on Industrial Parkway South to maximize access to free, nutritious food for those in need.

Another cupboard, recently installed at the Salvation Army's Northridge Community Church, completes the first phase of this pilot project and has already seen success.

“Our previous Board Chair, Allison Stuart, had the seed of the idea and I worked with her and built a pilot, installing one outside the food pantry the summer before last, and it has seen a lot of use,” says Aurora Food Pantry Board Member Dave Jackson, who is also a member of the Aurora Seniors Association. “Once we saw that, we decided in January or so of this year to approach the Town and see if we could work something out in terms of Town properties to place these pantries.”

The woodworkers at the Centre were more than eager to join in on the project.

“It was a great program,” says Dan Overington of the ASA. “It is wonderful what they are doing and anything we can do for the Town, or for anybody, we’re always willing to help.”

Overington says a team of four came together to source the materials, with an assist from Aurora Home Hardware, develop the design, and fulfil the construction process. Each cupboard, he said, took about five hours of labour from the collective.

As the woodworkers fired up their saws and drills, other members of the Food Pantry team took on the task of determining just where each cupboard should go.

Food Pantry Board Member Maureen Casey says they earmarked their locations "based on the demographics of where we felt our clients could be best served."

"The locations Dave worked on were based on the demographics of where we felt the need was and we were then able to find locations that were Town property where we could then erect them," she says. "It's about demographics and supplementing [our services]. There are a lot of people in our community who are not clients of ours, but still have food insecurity. [These cupboards are] more far-reaching and it gets to that next ring of people who might just need a little bit to get by for a couple of days."

A Food Pantry volunteer has been tasked with stocking the cupboards from food purchased by and donated to the Food Pantry but community members are invited to also leave appropriate non-perishable foods as well when they happen by.

"This is going to be available 24-7 in all-weather so that limits us in what we're going to put in there," Casey says. "It's sheltered and it is going to have to deal with the heat and the cold and things that they're able to make without other ingredients, which also may require can openers. Putting can openers into the box is something that we're also going to be looking at. If there are other non-perishable donations, if we get an influx of something in, it would go in there but very specifically it has to be something that is immediate, available, going to withstand the weather, and they can use."

"A lot of people will give a box of Kraft Dinner but you also need milk and/or butter. It's not a ready-made. Or you give a can, which is great and what we like, but they can't open it. We're trying to think of that, but generally it is a very scaled down [version] of what the offerings are at the Food Pantry. It is our commitment to quality and healthy fruit, vegetables, meats, breads " these types of things won't be in the pantry, but it is not around what we get into the pantry. We will make sure we stock it based on usage."

"Food insecurity is hitting all walks of life and you want to be able to provide something more than what we were doing on a monthly basis to those clients who are registered with us. We know there is that peripheral, so we really based it on finding a way to get out to the community and within their own community so they wouldn't have to go very far and it would be something that would be immediate. Providing food is supposed to be a temporary solution but in the last year our numbers have just skyrocketed. We were averaging about 700 clients before the pandemic per month, but we're well over 1,000 now. We're blessed with having a very generous community. People don't think we have a food insecurity" this might spark some of that community engagement to see, "What is that little pantry?" It might build some awareness within the community of why do we have a food pantry and build more awareness within Aurora that we do have an issue."

By Brock Weir
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