

Fresh beginnings for the York Region Food Network as it looks ahead to 40th anniversary



Food insecurity has been a top-of-mind issue for far too many community members in 2025, but while needs have grown significantly in recent years, it's not a new issue ? as the York Region Food Network can attest.

The York Region Food Network (YRFN) is celebrating fresh beginnings as they look ahead to their 40th anniversary in 2026.

Earlier this year, they moved from their long-time Aurora location on Industrial Parkway South to fresh, dedicated space in Newmarket and with more space to call their own, they're looking at fresh opportunities to make a difference.

?The YRFN started in 1986 and the initial efforts were really just to bring together all the local food banks and pantries in order to facilitate coordinated action going forward, so rather than having every municipality work independently, the YRFN came to kind of be that leader to help drive forward things like fundraising and those coordinated actions,? says YRFN Executive Director Kate Greavette.

The Network's focus, however, saw a slight shift in 1993 when they gained access to a plot of land and were able to get a community garden program off the proverbial ground.

?That was where we really kind of started to focus more on how we bring community out in order to provide fresh food access and have opportunities for folks to grow and do what they want with their own food, and it's just spiralled from there,? says Greavette of the garden program, which is now operating in several York Region municipalities.

This shift saw community food banks, like the Aurora Food Pantry, operate more independently once again as the YRFN took different approaches to addressing a common problem. While providing food is key, they also focus on longer-term solutions to an issue that, unfortunately, isn't going away any time soon.

?As an organization, we are really trying to adjust the physical, mental, and social health impacts of food insecurity [and] we do that through our immediate food access programs, our Affordable Markets, our Good Food Box and Meal programs that just provide that immediate relief for food,? she says. ?What we've also really learned over the years is people who might be living with food insecurity, but also just different demographics, often it can be seniors, people living with disabilities, there's a lot of loneliness, a lot of isolation, there's also stress and worries as well. A lot of our other programs around gardens, around our community cooking

classes, it's really been about addressing those mental health and social health impacts so people can come in, they can reduce their stress for a few hours, they can feel more confident that they're going to walk away with some food and have something to rely on, and that they're going to meet people, form friendships, and connect.?

The new space on Leslie Street, just north of Davis Drive, will not only allow them to continue programs York Region residents have come to rely upon, but expand their services as well.

While their old home in Aurora was in the former Aurora Cable building and shared by such organizations as the Aurora Food Pantry, Hope House Community Hospice, and Big Brothers Big Sisters Peel York, their new space is a former market and café, which lends itself well to the YRFN's vision.

It was an unexpected opportunity, says Greavette, noting they were hopeful they would be able to stay in Aurora, but Newmarket ultimately offered the location that made the most sense.

‘This was the only facility we found that had a kitchen; it meant that there was no interruption of our meal programs or any of our culinary programs,’ she says. ‘It is also allowing us to expand our programming space. We just have a much better space up front to host community meals, our Affordable Fresh Food Market on a weekly basis, and it provides a little more potential for us to grow within the community as we were pretty maxed out at our previous location.’

One key program they're eager to expand in the year ahead is their weekly Community Café, which is a lunch program for anyone who wants to come ? no questions asked. It offers, she says, a hot meal, great company, and great service.

Their Cater Kitchen initiative is also expected to increase capacity. Held twice a month, participants prepare meals for area caregivers, which are then distributed by Hope House.

Additionally, they're aiming to increase what they're able to offer on-site Market, which also operates out of 11 locations throughout York Region, such as Aurora's Northridge Community Church, including grains and more processed food options.

‘This would be our pilot site to do that and see if we can take it elsewhere,’ says Greavette. ‘We have quite a few other plans in the works for the next year, but we're just waiting to secure some funds, so our aim is really to have this as a community hub, using food as that way to bring people in, bring them together, but be able to really focus on skills training and on the social connections that come out of our programs.’

In the immediate future, the YRFN is focused on making their upcoming anniversary year one to remember.

The celebrations will kick off on February 27 with their 11th Winterfresh fundraiser at Aurora's Stonehaven Banquet Hall.

‘We do 100 per cent of our own fundraising and we have a budget of \$1.4 million, and we raise 100 per cent of that,’ says Joanne Witt, Director of Fund Development for the YRFN. ‘We apply for grants at various government levels, but we get no consistent funding at all.’

As the YRFN looks ahead to the next few years, including their half-century milestone 10 years from now, they hope that funding issue, and the affordability crisis, become things of the past.

‘We want to feel very stable as an organization,’ says Greavette on where she would like to see the YRFN by the time they reach their fiftieth year. ‘We would love to get to the point where we don't have to describe ourselves as ‘precariously funded’ or ‘precarious programs.’ We want to make sure that what we're offering is very stable?and we would love to see a world where we're able to focus on the food skills component of what we do, really working on getting people connected to the soil, growing food, cooking food, and being in a position where food insecurity rates are better so that we don't have to rely so much on that immediate food access side of things through the meals and the markets. We recognize that they play an important role and we want to keep

them going, but we don't necessarily want to have to have to keep expanding?because the community is in such vulnerable places and struggling with that food access.?