

"Give where you live," say Food Banks amid affordability crisis

Inflation has hit everyone, but some are better able to manage the hit than others.

That is particularly evident at the Aurora Food Pantry, which has seen significant shifts in their clientele as affordability continues to be in crisis mode.

"In addition to the people who have been coming to the Food Pantry for quite some time, we're now seeing two different groups: we're seeing more people who are coming in from other countries who are landing here and needing some help to get going, and that includes people from the Ukraine and trying to help them," says Allison Stuart, Board Chair of the Aurora Food Pantry. "Although they have come to Canada, many of them are still living out of a suitcase because they have been temporarily housed while more permanent housing is being found. They are still struggling with that, and we're trying to be really flexible with that population so we're able to support them as they continue their terrible, terrible struggle.

"The other group of people we're seeing are people who are working full time, or who may have full time and part time jobs, who have never been to a food pantry before and are feeling really badly that they're needing to turn to a food pantry now. We remind them that that is why we're here; we want to be able to help, but they are people who just didn't anticipate having this as part of their life experience."

What the Aurora Food Pantry has been trying to do is "normalize the shopping experience" for these clients "as much as it can be normal when you're having to make an appointment going grocery shopping," Stuart notes "including encouraging clients to take what they need, choose items that are most important to them, and, in some cases, pick out the foods that are most familiar with them from their country of origin.

"We're trying to help them through that resistance, that very understandable resistance to having to turn to others for help," says Ms. Stuart. "It is humbling for us as volunteers to see the range of people who are coming. There are lots of single-parent families, lots of singles, people who are needing on a more consistent basis food hampers delivered to their homes."

But as much as demand increases, it is increasing now at a time when community support for food banks tends to dip.

Donations typically ebb during the summer months because residents who are in a position to give are often away or are less engaged, and this extends to a lack of schools and community groups holding food drives over July and August. As such, local food banks like the Aurora Food Pantry have joined forces for the Give Where You Live campaign.

The Give Where You Live initiative includes the food banks of Aurora, Newmarket, Georgina, Markham, Richmond Hill and Vaughan, and encourages local residents, businesses, schools, churches and community groups to donate urgently-needed food items to their closest food bank.

"The timing for a collective food drive across multiple communities is opportune as we approach our slower summer months," said Adrian Bain, Executive Director of the Newmarket Food Pantry, in a statement. "With rising food and gas prices, combined with a housing crisis, more and more of our neighbours are turning to food banks. This joint venture among the local community food banks will help shine the spotlight on food insecurity, raise awareness, and bring in much-needed food and monetary donations for those who need a little bit of extra help right now."

Added Lee Reynolds, General Manager for the Richmond Hill Community Food Bank: "We have seen a significant increase in food bank use in Richmond Hill these past few months. We served 1,828 clients in the month of May alone, which is a 10 per cent increase over our April numbers. Simply put, more food is urgently needed in the coming months to help the growing number of families in need."

As far as Aurora is concerned, clients of the Food Pantry are looking for the same kinds of things as everyone else, but are especially appreciative of fresh or frozen fruits, vegetables and meats.

‘They are so expensive,’ says Ms. Stuart. ‘If we can sort of soften that blow, that is really helpful to the clients and they really enjoy the fresh produce. Each of us when we’re thinking of donating foods, we look to what we’re used to and what we’re trying to do with the pantry is expand our range of groceries that we have so that we can appeal to people with different backgrounds, different favourite foods from growing up and that sort of thing, but all the basic items: vegetable oil, sugar, spices, these really back to the fundamentals are very popular with the clients.’

For further information on the Aurora Food Pantry, including its current list of needs, visit aurorafoodpantry.ca

By Brock Weir Editor **Local Journalism Initiative Reporter**