

Shelves getting bare

By Sean Pearce
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As the last big drive before Thanksgiving draws to a close, York Region's food banks are cautioning demand for donations remains on the rise.

Donations received in the lead-up to the Easter long weekend were lower than anticipated and the trend isn't likely to change going into the summer, Aurora Food Pantry director Lorna Rummenie said.

While the community is continuing to provide non-perishable food items and cash, the increase in donations expected during the spring drive never really materialized. Food drives typically take place at Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter.

"The donations are definitely down this year," Ms Rummenie said. "We got our usual weekly amount and not much extra."

The food pantry recently moved from its old Yonge Street location to a new home at 350 Industrial Pkwy. S, a building previously occupied by Rogers TV and, before that, Aurora Cable Internet. Thus far, things are working out well, Ms Rummenie said, although she's concerned about how donations will keep pace with demand in the coming months. As it is, the pantry is running low on cold cereal and everyday lunch items such as juice boxes, pudding and fruit cups and canned meat, she said. Monetary donations are used to buy milk, eggs, margarine and other perishable goods. Beyond that, there is a need for toiletries and diapers as well.

Hopefully, with Easter arriving early, people might just be a little late with their donations, Ms Rummenie added. "It's really hard to judge," she said. "People may not be in the mood just yet."

Perhaps, but food banks across the GTA are having a difficult time meeting their targets.

In Toronto, the Daily Bread and North York Harvest food banks have received less than half of what they were hoping to get and are extending their Easter drives by a week in response.

The various food banks in the region are faring a little better and are about half-way to hitting their donation goal of 80,000 pounds of food, York Region Food Network executive director Joan Stonehocker said.

Still, it will take a miracle for them to reach that figure by the target date of April 8, she said, adding the spring season tends to be a slower period for donations and this year is shaping up to be no exception.

"People were so generous with the Christmas drive and then we had the Haiti (earthquake) and a number of other things that people were paying attention to as well," she said.

The good news is the demand tends to level off during summer, Ms Stonehocker said, but the downside is the amount of food donated tends to plummet as well.

As a result, the need for donations only continues to increase.

"No one is seeing a decrease (in demand), that's for sure," she said.

Certainly, the economy played a big role, Ms Stonehocker said.

But while we're seeing signs of recovery, many are still unemployed, struggling and forced to rely on social assistance, such as the food bank.

It's difficult to predict when and how things will change for those in need, she said, especially given recent developments, such as the province's decision to move ahead with an as-of-yet unknown replacement of the up



The food bank needs your help. Aurora Food Pantry volunteer John Sargent in front of the facility's empty shelves. As demand for the service continues to rise, donations have dwindled. *Staff Photo/Mike Barrett*

to \$250-per-month special diet allowance, citing its \$250-million cost and the potential for abuse. Food banks generally offer non-perishable prepared foods, Ms Stonehocker said, and such government programs can do a great deal to help people obtain fresh, healthier sustenance to go along with it. Like others in the sector, she hopes people will remember the hungry this summer and continue to give generously to their local food bank.

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