

Hunger report cuts to issue's core

By Chris Traber
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Hunger hurts. The pain claws beyond your belly.

It humiliates, saddens and shames.

"Poverty is pretending that you forgot your lunch," said one resident included in the York Region Food Network's 2009 hunger report, released last week.

Food bank clients spoke about being homeless, feeling like failures as a parents and their children being bullied because they don't have the same food and clothes as other kids.

For one elementary school student, poverty means "Hiding your feet so the teacher won't get mad when you don't have boots."

Hunger in the Midst of Prosperity includes blunt statistics gathered from the region's eight food banks and heartfelt voluntary commentary from 176 clients.

Our food banks fed more than 54,000 mouths last year. The 2006 census said our regional medium household income was \$89,000, but the same survey indicated 13 per cent of our neighbours live below the poverty line.

So why do so many need food banks? Network executive director Joan Stonehocker and volunteers sought answers.

"Though the recession is over, the effects are readily apparent," she said. "We're finding that people's EI (employment insurance) is running out. We're still getting a lot of new families. That's what we're seeing. Things haven't leveled off or improved as one would hope."

Food bank visits have increased 27 per cent from 2008 and continue to rise. January's 4,430 clients, 40 per cent of whom are children, is 6-per-cent higher than the same month last year.

The bottom line on hunger in York Region is people existing below the line. The most frequent reason cited by one in three respondents for visiting a food bank is job loss. Other answers included family breakups, reduced work hours and being new to the area.

"People are reluctant to tell you things about hunger," Ms Stonehocker said. "It's not a topic that comes up easily. It's embarrassing."

"They will tell you how little they have left at end of the month. As such, most stay at home. That's the type of isolation poverty causes."

When asked about hunger, four in 10 respondents said in the last three months they couldn't afford to buy enough food. Almost half of those surveyed at a food bank said they went a day without food.

Parents will often go without to ensure their children eat. Despite this buffering from poverty and hunger, 7.4 per cent of regional food bank clients said their kids had gone hungry in the last three months.

Low-income households cannot afford a nutritious diet, the report states. examining the predicament of a fixed income single mother with a teenage son and a younger daughter.

Ontario Works, a maximum shelter allowance and additional assistance, including a Child Tax Benefit, provides a monthly income of \$1,682. Average rent for a two-bedroom unit in central and northern York is \$974.

The cost of a nutritious diet, based on public health standard food basket protocol is \$540 monthly. Based on this scenario, the family has \$168 remaining to cover basic monthly expenses.



Hunger in the Midst of Prosperity. While economists suggest the recession is over, its effects are still readily apparent, says Joan Stonehocker, executive director of the York Region Food Network. The group has just released a new report about hunger in the region. *Staff photo/Nick Iwanyshyn*

In reality, people usually choose to pay their rent and other fixed expenses first, the report states. Food becomes a discretionary expense, resulting in a diet of poor nutritional value. Since 2001 the number of clients fed by York Region food banks has almost doubled. Our food banks rely expressly on donations. Our communities are generous, Ms Stonehocker said, but demand outstrips supply.

"It's a struggle to do the work," she said. "It's a juggling act."

Hunger and poverty are largely invisible plights. The solutions are slightly more conspicuous.

"We need systemic planning and people getting involved in their communities," she said, adding that the network enjoys a dedicated volunteer corps, but can always use more people.

"We're getting better with social services in York," she said. "But, there's no social planning network. We need a collaborative response and real funding streams. We need affordable housing and employment."

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