

Food bank aims to feed area's hungry

More than 2,500 free meals a day are being sought by the area's poor, and the agencies that serve them are turning to the food industry to meet the overwhelming demand.

Provisions Ottawa, formed by 17 agencies that run soup kitchens or distribute groceries for the poor, plans to seek large-scale donations from the food industry, said spokesman Matthew Barbour.

The group is approaching farmers, grocery stores and food processors and wholesalers for contributions to a central food warehouse. Donations from the public are also welcome, but can't be accepted until a warehouse is obtained, he said.

From the warehouse, food will be distributed to the churches and community groups operating food programs.

Provisions Ottawa hopes to have the food bank operating before the end of summer. Barbour said the group has just started contacting suppliers and is unsure what the response will be.

Planning started in January. The operation will be modeled after Edmonton's food bank, which began four years ago and is distributing 5,000 pounds of food daily to 89 agencies.

Halifax, Toronto and Montreal are also trying to organize food banks to secure a constant supply, Barbour said.

Most groups operating food programs in the city are associated with Provisions Ottawa. They include the Shepherds of Good Hope, which runs the St. Brigid's soup kitchen, The Odawa Native Friendship Centre and the West End Interfaith group.

A survey this spring of the 17 groups supporting the project showed that 77,000 meals per month - more than 2,500 per day - are being provided by soup kitchens and emergency grocery programs, Barbour said.

The survey did not include grocery vouchers distributed to the needy by at least 20 groups, he added.

While details of the food bank are being worked out, programs will continue to operate on "luck, a prayer" and timely public donations, as one soup kitchen organizer put it.

Some are expanding operations to meet the growing need for food by single-parent families, the homeless, the unemployed, ex-psychiatric patients and low-income working people.

Others are struggling to survive.

The West End Community Lunch Program, which serves lunch three times a week to about 120 women and children, only has \$800 in its bank account.

"We're at rock bottom and it's now a matter of whether we can continue or not," said Marg McGowan, program coordinator.



The program costs \$1,000 a month to run. Since it started 18 months ago, it has been supported by the West End Faith Interfaith group, service clubs and private donations.

"In the past, it seemed somebody would always come through," McGowan said.

The free lunches, served at the Foster Farm Community Centre on Ramsey Crescent, were started to help the many single mothers living in the area. About 50 per cent of the meals go to children.

The Olde Forge Community Centre received 60 emergency requests for groceries in May compared to 38 in the same month last year, said Barb Lajeunesse, the centre's coordinator.

"We're up about 33 per cent over last year during the past five months," Lajeunesse said.

"It's unbelievable. I've never known it to jump so high. I really hate to think what is going to happen as the year goes on."

Lajeunesse said most food requests are from single mothers in the area's five low-rental housing developments.

The community centre forwards requests to the West End Interfaith group, which meets the demand with donations from member congregations. Groceries or food vouchers worth \$25 to \$40 are usually issued, Lajeunesse said.

"But the church congregations aren't growing with the demand. And some of them are starting to wonder if they can keep this up indefinitely."

In 1979, during the first year of the centre's food program, there were 100 requests. Last year, the number jumped to 500.

Dave Rayner, acting director at the Anglican Social Services Centre, said the food situation there has "never been so desperate". The King Edward Street centre received 1,173 requests for groceries in May compared to 837 in January, he said.

"It's been escalating each month and we've spent close to two-thirds of our annual food budget. Somehow, we're going to have to raise more money to cover the rest of the year."

Direct requests to Woodroffe United Church for emergency groceries increased to 45 this May compared to 27 a year ago, said church social worker Jean Kelly.

"We've budgeted \$1,000 a month for food vouchers, but we've gone to twice that amount several times since the beginning of the year."

The church distributed \$20,000 worth of food last year.

Low-income working families are coming for help in greater numbers, Kelly said.

The number of people eating free lunches in the basement of St. Brigid's church on Cumberland Street has increased steadily since last summer, when the service was just getting established, said director Bill Bradley.

Only about 50 people a day were lining up outside the door a year ago, but about 250 are now being fed each day in the dining hall.

"And it doesn't look like we're through growing," Bradley said.

A second dining hall of equal size will be opened in the west end this September.



From the Ottawa Food Bank's media archives

In addition, about 85 requests for groceries are filled each week.

Lise Corbeil-Vincent, a spokesman for the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton, said people not getting enough to eat fall into two categories.

"There are the street people - bag men and bag ladies - and then there are the families living below the poverty line on social assistance or income from low-paying jobs."

About 28,000 people in the region either live on welfare or provincial benefits payments and in many cases the money just doesn't cover expenses, she said.

Bradley said 61 per cent of the people eating at St. Brigid's are between 16 and 34, "the prime working age".

"A lot of them are potentially employable, but they become unemployable because they just can't get regular work," he said.

"We had one guy (staying in the Guigues shelter for men) we woke up every day at 5 a.m. so he could be at the labor pool when it opened at 6. He went down every day for three weeks and didn't get one job.

"Finally one day we asked him if he wanted a wakeup and he said no, he'd had enough.

"People in this city just don't realize how poor people are and how many of them there are."



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