

# Rising demand leaves area food banks hungry for help

By Yolande Cole, The Ottawa Citizen December 21, 2008

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## Jean Laughren (blue) and Lynda Bennett fill up food baskets for clients at the Lanark County Food Bank in Carleton Place.

**Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen**

OTTAWA — Nadine Kennedy has never struggled to pay for basic groceries to feed her family. But every day she sees firsthand the challenges facing the growing number of Ottawa-area residents who can't afford to put food on the table.

Mrs. Kennedy is the manager at Lanark County Food Bank, and like many rural food bank operators, she's concerned that the Christmas charity of the community won't be enough to meet a rising demand for help from a clientele that is largely comprised of children.

"Everyone's really generous in December," says Mrs. Kennedy. "Come springtime, they forget. February, March, April is touch and go."

Mrs. Kennedy says the clientele at the food bank in Carleton Place, which is increasing by about one new registrant a day, overwhelmingly consists of young families.

According to a recent study by Food Banks Canada, children make up 40 per cent of users at rural food banks, which is three per cent higher than the national average. Families with at least one child, seniors and people with disabilities are also more frequent users of food banks in rural areas.

While the organization doesn't know why the number of child users is higher in rural areas, Judy Dancause, the executive director at the Agape Centre, a food bank in Cornwall — where child users make up 44 per cent of the centre's clientele — thinks higher birth rates in rural areas could have something to do with it.

A large part of the Cornwall food bank's clientele, which has increased by 30 per cent in the last year, also consists of what she calls "the working poor."

"These are folks that ... used to have a higher paying manufacturing job and they used to make \$20 or \$30 an hour, and now they're making \$9," she says.

On top of cost-of-living increases in expenses such as rent, power and transportation, Ms. Dancause says the increase in the cost of staple foods like milk, bread and pasta early this year was enough to break the budget for many families.

"It felt like it was the last straw for a lot of families," she says. "They had been on the edge for quite a while, and just seeing their grocery bills increase \$20 and \$30 a week, they just couldn't do it."

Katharine Schmidt, the executive director of Food Banks Canada, says food banks across the country that rely on community support to keep their doors open are bracing for trouble.

"As the economy takes a downturn, there is greater potential for families to have to come for help," she says. "There's also a greater likelihood that those that have been supporting food banks may not be able to support them."

The Riceville food bank, a hamper program with the Ottawa Food Bank, feeds about 1,500 people a year.

Co-ordinator Maynard Chant said they seriously considered closing their doors about a year and a half ago due to limited resources. After their food supply was broken into this past August, they were set back by \$2,500 worth of food.

"It's kind of hard for us to recuperate from that," he says.

Nevertheless, Mr. Chant says they've managed to rebound, thanks to the ongoing support of the Ottawa Food Bank and from donations from the community.

He says they aren't seeing a major increase in demand this year, but expects to see a bigger impact from the economic downturn next year.

"People in poverty are still poor, regardless. They don't have any stock in Wall Street," he says. "The rippling effect probably won't happen for us until next year."

The Ottawa Food Bank relies on charitable donations for 90 per cent of its funding and some rural food banks, like Lanark County, depend entirely on volunteers and community donors.

Mrs. Kennedy says the community is generous, but there are some who question whether the food bank is really helping those in need.

"They don't see what I see," she says. "They don't see a young mother with two babies coming in here in tears because the husband's lost his job, and he's not coping well ... She's trying to feed the babies, and she can't go out and get a job because she's postpartum depression with a set of twins. It just goes on and on. It would break your heart."

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