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Donations down by 20 per cent, food bank says

Bruce Ward

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The early onset of winter is an ominous sign for the Ottawa Food Bank, the charity's executive director says.

"We're really afraid that this is going to put a huge burden on our agencies in the next few months," Peter Tilley said yesterday.

"We're really scared here because of what we're already facing in December. If this continues, obviously heating bills will go up and hydro bills will go up. A lot of families are going to have to turn to the food bank as they deal with a winter that we've not seen for a long, long time."

Mr. Tilley also said that donations to the food bank were down so far in December.

"I'd say we're down about 20 per cent of where we would want to be at this point of our year. We hate to hit the panic button, but supplies aren't where we had hoped for December."

Added Mr. Tilley, "The big myth is that everything that comes in December is going to feed families at Christmas. The truth is, what comes in in December really makes us able to feed families in January, February and March.

"We really need that food to get us through December and into January and February."

The Ottawa Food Bank supplies 117 area agencies from Stittsville to Rockland, including the Ottawa Mission and Shepherds of Good Hope.

On the bright side, Mr. Tilley said, the food bank will be picking up food donations from several businesses later this week.

"We've got a ton of businesses collecting food for us this week, so let's hope that comes through."

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and Ottawa-area MPPs Phil McNeely, Madeleine Meilleur and Yasir Naqvi assisted with the sorting of food yesterday at the Food Bank's Michael Street location.

"Hunger is not seasonal," Mr. McGuinty said, encouraging the public to donate.

"But this is something we can do together, and it is especially important at this time of year."

Last December, Mr. Tilley said, the food bank found itself in dire straits with inventory at its lowest point.

"We put out a news release and the public responded. We had huge cash donations, and we had tons of food pour into the warehouse."

Mr. Tilley has a persistent cold, but refuses to take time off because the food bank relies on the holiday season to put potential donors in a charitable mood.

He attended two charity events yesterday, following four others during the weekend.

"I've been shaking it off, but I've just got to bear with it this time of year. I've had one day off in the last 21 days. Sometime after Christmas, I'll flake out for three days."

With files from Jessey Bird

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