

Food banks may become way of life

Charitable food drives aiding welfare system to feed the hungry

"The Ontario Minister of Emergency Food Supplies said today that a million kilograms of canned goods are urgently needed to feed hungry families in Metro"

— Future News Item about 1990

By Paul Bilodeau
Toronto Star

Are food banks here to stay? John Sweeney, Ontario minister of community and social services, says he's determined not to let charitable food drives become a permanent part of our social welfare system.

Sweeney does predict food banks will continue to exist in Metro — at least until there's an end to the influx of people from economically depressed areas of the country and of refugees from around the world.

"As long as you've got unemployment rates in the Maritimes or in Western Canada around 15 per cent, and 5 per cent in Metro, you are going to have a problem," he told The Star. "You are just going to attract people to this area who are needy."

Last weekend, Metro residents opened their hearts and cupboards to deposit tonnes of canned and packaged foodstuffs for distribution to more than 60,000 hungry Metro residents — including 20,000 children.

Age of plenty

Everyone involved — the public, politicians and social workers — seems to agree that food banks shouldn't be needed in a modern age of plenty. But there's a lingering apprehension that large, centralized food banks, unknown in Metro even four years ago, could become permanent fixtures — a kind of parallel social welfare system.

That's something that church leaders have warned Sweeney about. He is confident the next provincial budget, due in mid-May, will contain increases in family benefits and general welfare payments, with a particular emphasis on more money for Metro's spiralling rental housing costs. Housing costs have been identified as the prime reason why low-income people have no money to spend on groceries.

A provincial study of customers of food banks showed the majority paid 50 to 80 per cent of their income on shelter. Another study of the province's emergency food and shelter programs showed the majority of those who use such programs is families, most already receiving social assistance payments. Another 15 per cent are the working poor,

too proud to go on welfare, but hungry just the same.

Sweeney said dramatic changes to the social assistance system must await the report of a provincial review committee headed by former Family Court judge George Thomson. But the exhaustive review likely won't be completed until fall at the earliest.

Opposition critics charge that the government is using the report to delay implementing measures that will make food banks obsolete. Worse yet, they say food banks are letting the government off the hook by alleviating the most obvious failure of our social security net — hunger.

Sweeney says he is aware of the danger of food banks becoming accepted, permanent institutions. "We don't agree with that at all."

'It's scary'

But the signs are already there. A proposal has been advanced for a national association linking food banks across the country. At a conference in Toronto last October, food bank directors mapped out strategy for a national collection and distribution system, based on one already operating in the Atlantic provinces. A draft plan visualized centralized distribution centres and interprovincial trucking of surplus goods donated by major food corporations and marketing boards.

Though one of the food banks' stated objectives is to "provide a short-term solution to the problem of hunger while working on a long-term solution," their plans looked decidedly permanent.

"It's scary," said Donna MacDonald of FoodShare, an umbrella group representing Metro emergency food agencies. She fears the national network of food banks is a step toward a "parallel welfare system" which will be difficult to dismantle.

MacDonald, a nutritionist, favors more community-based, healthful solutions, such as self-help schemes to let poor people organize into food-buying co-operatives and urban gardening programs.

MacDonald believes that canned and non-perishable foods doled out by food banks are perpetuating poor health among the poor.

"It's a very degrading experience, it just teaches you to be helpless," she said. In the long term, food banks will be hard pressed to keep up with demand. "It will soon become just another social program," she said.

Food banks are definitely here to stay, says Graham Riches, a University of Regina professor of



Helping hand: Gerard Kennedy, foreground, pitches in at the recent spring food drive for the needy. He's executive director of the Daily Bread Food Bank, Metro's largest

social work who wrote a 1986, Canada-wide study called *Food Banks and the Welfare Crisis*.

"The government will come to rely on these bodies because they are a substitute for social assistance payments, and there will be less pressure on the government to revamp the system," he said in an interview, referring to the United States where the first food bank was set up in 1966.

"Now it's a major industry in the U.S." and private charities have been hard pressed to keep up with the demand for food.

Riches, a board member of a food bank in Regina, said food banks are a direct result of the "collapse of Canada's social security net."

He calls them "institutionalized public begging."

Riches also said the hunger crisis has been building for years, starting in Western Canada and

spreading across the country.

According to his thesis: "This crisis has been fuelled by governments' insistence that inflation and deficit spending must be curbed through restraint; by a reliance on the private sector for economic growth, by a lack of commitment to full employment, by the alleged public perception that social spending is too high, and by the breakdown of political and public support for a tax-based system of social security."

Riches said people involved in the food bank problem tend to "professionalize" their status and perpetuate their institution. In Ontario, there has also been some pressure to have government take over direct funding of food banks, Riches said.

But Gerard Kennedy, executive director of the Daily Bread Food Bank (Metro's largest), denies there's been any such request.

Government funding might "compromise" the food banks' ability to get the true picture of hunger across to Canadians, he said.

Food banks have not only answered a crying need for food in Canadian society, their volunteer leaders are taking an active role in calling for solutions, Kennedy said.

Food bank officials are wary of becoming permanent institutions. They've adopted a cautious approach to a national association, which will be used mainly for gathering and disseminating information, said Kennedy, who was involved in setting up Canada's first food bank, in Edmonton in 1981.

"Food banks may be the first step in getting (the) social welfare system back on the road, by pointing up that the problems and need exist," he said.

'Anger, frustration'

The existence of the food banks has caused "anger and frustration" among opposition politicians, said Richard Johnston, Ontario's New Democratic Party social services critic.

"The lesson should be that people would rather have the money in their pocket to go and buy groceries, rather than have to go to a food bank for a handout," he said.

The NDP wants a full-scale restructuring and equalization of welfare payments, so that disabled people get at least as much as the elderly. Johnston predicts the May budget will add another \$60 million to social assistance, but he estimates at least \$200 million is needed.

Bill Davis, the Progressive Conservative social services critic, called for an emergency conference of all agencies involved to map strategy for dealing with the hunger crisis.

"I really think that it's at the stage where we need to do a quick and thorough investigation to deal with the cause," Davis said. "I don't think we can continue to have food bank drives every three months to meet the need."

A long wait

But radical changes to eliminate the need for food banks may be long in coming.

Thomson told The Star that any "major structural change" to the welfare system should await his committee's report.

"After all, our recommendations will be based on 1,500 submissions from groups and people all over the province," Thomson said. "It is really the people that will be speaking. I think I can say that, as a committee, we are attempting to try to find answers that can mean that food banks as institutions should become unnecessary."

But he said the study should not be looked upon as an excuse for government not to take interim emergency measures.

"Whatever issues the government thinks are pressing, we're not asking them to hold off on that," he said.