

Creative solutions to end HUNGER

By Lois Sweet
TORONTO STAR

COME JANUARY, there won't be any fireworks to mark the 10th anniversary of Canada's first food bank. Instead, anti-poverty groups will mourn the fact that food banks not only exist, but are growing.

And they will continue to cast about for creative solutions to end hunger.

In 1981, Canada's first food bank opened in Edmonton to dole out emergency supplies to people hit by the recession. A decade later, Canada has moved full circle — from bust to boom to bust again. Throughout, food banks have flourished.

Today, some 1,200 emergency food programs help feed 1.4 million Canadians a year. Where, anti-poverty groups wonder, will it all end? And, most important, how?

"We should have demanded that the government step in right at the beginning," says Gerard Kennedy, executive director of Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank. "Had we been less naive, we would have. We thought we had the mechanisms in society to prevent hardship from happening. But it's not true."

And so, people struggle along, doing what they can to stem the tide of hunger. In addition, though, they lobby for measures to prevent it. It's a tough balancing act.

It's clear from talking to social workers, food-bank workers and activists that there's no single solution to end hunger. What's required, they say, is a combination of things: government commitment to strengthening and integrating economic and social policies; community initiatives; and the deepening of a social conscience on the part of the private sector.

It's a tall order, perhaps, but efforts are being made on all three fronts.

Government commitment: Anti-poverty groups agree that this week's announcement of welfare increases by the provincial government is a step in the right direction. But Metro Councillor Brian Ashton says the 7 per cent increase in basic living allowance payments and a 10 per cent hike in shelter payments, beginning Jan. 1, won't significantly reduce food bank demand.

"I'd tell the food banks to leave their doors open," says Ashton.

(And since one-third of food bank users are members of society's "working poor," an increase in welfare payments won't help them at all.)

Only a radical transformation of Ontario's social assistance system will close down food banks. And former treasurer Robert Nixon estimated that this would cost around \$3 billion a year.

Besides, a commitment to move on social reform is required both federally and provincially, and Ottawa doesn't seem to rate anti-poverty measures high on its political agenda.

Graham Riches, a professor of social work at the University of Regina, says Canada could learn a lot by looking at the policies of countries that don't have food banks. Scandinavian countries, says Riches, act on the assumption that everyone has the right to a decent-paying job and gear their social systems toward full employment and job training.

"There's an air of unreality about the idea of full employment because we're used to living with 8 and 9 per cent unemployment rates," he

says. "But they have to come down. That's the only way the issue can be turned around."

Riches also cites public-sector support in such crucial areas as pay equity and housing as keys to solving the problem.

In the meantime, though, it's Canada's most vulnerable citizens who are suffering the most. Today, one child in six in Canada is growing up poor. Of almost 100,000 people a month in Metro who get their food from Daily Bread, 39,000 are children.

Members of the Child Poverty Action Group are appalled at this. They are pushing for "a generous child endowment" policy. This would involve creating a child tax credit for median-income families that would be 25 per cent of the estimated cost of raising a child.

According to Statistics Canada figures released this week, the median family income for 1989 was \$44,460.

Marvyn Novick, the group's social policy co-ordinator, described the credit to a Senate committee as: "fully indexed, (it) would increase by 5 per cent per child for every \$1,000 that the family was below the median, and could cover the full expenses of raising a child for parents whose earnings or income were only sufficient to keep them out of adult poverty."

This credit would be paid, Novick says, by taxing the childless at higher tax levels than people with children.

Riches isn't convinced. "We won't solve the food bank problem by tinkering with child tax credits," he says. "We can't afford to make them adequate because not enough people work. And the political rhetoric about jobs is meaningless because they are largely low-wage, seasonal, and without benefits."

"We need our economic and social policies linked because good social policy is good economic policy."

Community initiatives: Three years ago, FoodShare, a public awareness group in Toronto, decided to quit working on short-term solutions to hunger. Instead, it began concentrating on longer-term projects that stress self-help and eliminating the causes of hunger.

With federal funding, it started the Food Action Project, which includes helping people organize community gardens and dinners, take trips to farmers' markets and pick-your-own farms, start food-buying clubs, and compile a shopping directory of budget stores.

"We know these things aren't a solution to the hunger problem," says Richard Yampolsky, FoodShare's executive director. "But they give people more bang for their buck and access to fresh fruit and vegetables (in summer). They don't make up for inadequate social assistance rates, but they help people develop skills and confidence and allow them to gain control over at least one aspect of their lives."

The results, says Yampolsky, have been impressive. Many people now have options they didn't have before, such as growing their own food, and are developing expertise in community groups that could serve them well in the job market.

Kennedy, however, doesn't believe that these

