

INSIGHT

At odds over feeding the poor

Activists debate whether it's good politics to require low-income people to work for their food

BY JOHN WILLIS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

KATHLEEN is packing fresh organic cherries into one-pound bags in a bright, airy warehouse under the Gardiner Expressway on Toronto's waterfront.

The social assistance she receives isn't always enough to fend off hunger for her two children, so twice a month she comes to this Eastern Ave. neighbourhood of empty industrial buildings to work with about 40 other people for the anti-hunger project Field To Table. For her efforts, she earns a box of fresh fruit, greens and root vegetables.

"I like it because I learn about new foods to feed my kids and I get to have grown-up conversations for a change," she says — bringing a laugh from the other cherry-packers, many of them also mothers.

But some anti-poverty activists say the project Kathleen is involved in is an illusion that undermines the best interests of Toronto's poorest citizens.

Food bank figures show that between July, 1995, and February, 1996, the number of Greater Toronto residents not sure if they could provide enough food for their families exploded by an astonishing 71 per cent — an average of almost 9 per cent a month. Any disease that increased that fast would surely be a catastrophe.

Comparing hunger to a disease is not so far-fetched: an adequate supply of nutritious food is a primary contributor to health. And yet no health insurance plan covers food.

Many social activists believe an adequate supply of food is like health care — a basic right a person shouldn't be forced to work for. They are deeply disturbed by Field To Table, which

seems to be putting people on a "shop floor" to earn their daily bread.

Field To Table was launched by the activist group **Foodshare** five years ago to provide a direct connection between Ontario farmers and low-income Torontonians.

The program delivers fresh produce in a Good Food Box, a family-sized load of fresh vegetables and fruits bought wholesale and passed on at or near cost. In peak seasons, Field To Table ships as many as 4,000 boxes to more than 200 volunteer drop-off points around Metro twice a month.

Participants pay \$15 for the basic box or they can buy organic produce at a higher price. Some participants, like Kathleen, put in time packing the food rather than paying cash.

Many, including Metro and provincial politicians, consider the Good Food Box to be an innovative and exciting project because it's addressing hunger while supporting Ontario farmers. The program gets a \$30,000 annual grant from the province.

Foodshare research shows it is reaching its intended target — low-income families and other people such as the disabled and those with HIV.

But Sue Cox, executive director of the Daily Bread Food Bank, the city's biggest food agency, thinks the Good Food Box is based on a "dangerous" misunderstanding.

What people need is not food but money from employment or social assistance to buy the food for themselves, she says in her office at Lake Shore Blvd. W. and Bathurst St.

A disagreement between leaders of Toronto's main food agencies over long-term solutions has been simmering out of the public eye. But now, key players are ready to air their differences more openly. And Cox is warming up:

"I am convinced that food-based solutions are not solutions, because the problem is an income-based problem, a problem related to income."

She has no objection to the Good Food Box as a small-scale consumer option, but she says it risks putting a powerful weapon in the hands of neo-

Disagreements between food agency chiefs simmer out of the public eye



BORIS SPREMO/TORONTO STAR

PUTTING FOOD ON THE TABLE: Daily Bread's Sue Cox, with volunteers, says government should focus on job creation, income support.

conservative governments if it is viewed as the solution to hunger.

Daily Bread is focused on emergency needs, distributing free hampers of food to as many as 60,000 people every month through a network of more than 900 distribution points in church halls and community centres across Metro and the surrounding suburbs.

Most of the food lining the shelves at Daily Bread comes from food companies — improperly labelled cans and overstock, for example.

The food banks are a creature of the free-market economy, scooping up the food that isn't contributing to someone's bottom line, redistributing it and making it useful again.

To get hold of that food, a person

goes to a local food bank or to Daily Bread's headquarters at the foot of Bathurst St. There, a series of questions are asked by trained volunteers to determine whether the prospective client is truly in need.

At Daily Bread, the interview sometimes turns up other problems the volunteers may be able to help with — problems such as mistakes in welfare payments or unfair landlords.

Food banks, Cox says bluntly, were the wrong idea from the start.

"We now have sectors of society that think that the way to make hunger go away is by redistributing food which is thrown out by food companies." In this "very unpleasant situation," people are relying on some

company's mistakes for their basic sustenance, she says.

She believes that the key actor in solving the problem is government — it should focus on job creation and income support.

Daily Bread has a network of committees that carry out anti-poverty research and pressure governments on issues critical to its clients: Welfare, job creation, housing and health care.

Foodshare head Debbie Field agrees full employment and a strong social safety net are key. But she questions Daily Bread's focus on government action. "It's not good enough to just ask people to join us on the barricades," Field says.

She thinks the problem can be addressed directly and immediately by building "food communities" — such as the Good Food Box "community" of small farms and low-income consumers — to overcome barriers people with a low income face in getting affordable, healthy food.

Her organization's view is that hunger is the most extreme form of a larger food problem and simply getting the poorest people back into the big food stores isn't the solution.

"In our economy, all people lose control over their own food," says Field. "Everything in our society discourages cooking from scratch, discourages going to the farmers' market, discourages finding healthy and affordable food. And the food industry wants us to buy the most processed and most expensive foods."

Foodshare's programs are the outline of an alternative food system in Toronto, an antidote to the failures of the free-market food industry, run by and for low-income residents.

But for Cox at Daily Bread, Foodshare's "community building" looks a lot like her worst nightmare: She fears that people who can't afford to be mainstream consumers will be forced into a separate "abnormal" food system especially for them and governments will wash their hands of the problem.

She strikes her table with finality: "I'd rather stay with the old food bank model — and, lord knows, it has warts — and push for larger systemic change."

John Willis is a Toronto writer.