

HED: Lettuce Isn't Cheap, and Neither Are Wraparound Services

Riverside food banks are uniquely positioned to provide additional or “wraparound” services like addictions counselling and primary healthcare because they directly interact with the neighbourhood’s most vulnerable residents. But frontline workers say they don’t have the resources to adequately deliver these services.

“Food banks were created to be a temporary solution, not a permanent one,” says Diane Dyson, interim vice-president of research and advocacy for the Daily Bread Food Bank. She adds that the charity was established in 1984 to serve the growing number of Canadians struggling to access food due to the economic recession in the early ‘80s.

But while food banks seem like they’d be an ideal place for many Riverside residents to get other types of support, they’re not well-equipped to handle the added burden, according to Dyson.

IMAGE

The [Daily Bread Food Bank's 2022 "Who's Hungry Report"](#) says people struggling with food insecurity can experience a “downward spiral” that leads to a lack of nutrition and chronic disease, then eventually large medical bills and inadequate income. Prolonged food insecurity can also negatively impact mental health. Seventy-one per cent of survey respondents to the report said they “sometimes or always” felt depressed.

“Once you're having problems with food, then you might be having problems with rent — you're going to be having problems in other ways,” says Toronto-Danforth city councillor Paula Fletcher, who wants Riverside food banks to expand the number of services they provide.

Too much on their plate

Not only has food insecurity increased since the 1980s, it’s gotten much worse over the past few years since the COVID-19 pandemic hit Toronto.

“People are getting squeezed harder and harder every month,” says Peter Tabuns, the MPP for Toronto-Danforth and interim leader of the Ontario NDP. “Over the last two years, the demand for food bank services has gone up dramatically. Until action is taken by the government that’s really substantial, this problem is not going to go away.

“It’s not going to be solved, and will result in a lot of misery.”

IMAGE

Despite being one of Canada's largest food banks, the Daily Bread Food Bank doesn't receive government funding. Instead, it's mostly supported by volunteer labour, and is entirely financed through charitable donations, Dyson explains.

Wraparound services are now available at some Daily Bread Food Bank locations, she adds. But its Riverside operation, which is hosted in the basement of St. Anne's Parish at the intersection of Gerrard Street East and De Grassi Street, doesn't.

"One of the stress points that's happening right now is that almost all [food banks] are on volunteer power. And volunteers, especially a few years into this pandemic, are really tired because they are now serving often [two or three times the number \[of meals\] that they used to pre-pandemic](#)," Dyson says, adding that volunteers are already overworked.

IMAGE

Can't heal hungry

Toronto Public Health addresses food insecurity in Riverside through the South Riverdale Community Health Centre (SRCHC). But Rhiannon Thomas, program coordinator of the centre's Counterfeit Harm Reduction Program, says it doesn't have enough financial support to do so effectively.

"We always try to provide food because most of the people that are coming to our doors are food-insecure," explains Thomas. "People can't come and get health education and talk about their health if they can't focus because they're hungry."

She adds that SRCHC provides social workers, harm reduction services, primary healthcare and educational programs for managing chronic illnesses such as diabetes. These are the kinds of wraparound services Fletcher says she hopes to introduce at food banks in her ward.

But ultimately, Thomas says, establishing a dedicated food bank or adding more wraparound services at SRCHC — while necessary to address the needs of Riverside's most vulnerable community members — isn't feasible.

IMAGE

Thomas notes that she and her colleagues have been pushing for more funding for 20 years without action from elected officials; but they're still expected to provide more services without additional resources.

"We are losing people to poverty-related illness and not having access to healthcare, especially preventative healthcare," she explains. "The same things that we've been advocating for — for years — are things that we're continuing to have to advocate for. Sometimes you hear about new government funding, but it is such a small amount compared to what we need."

“It often feels like you are banging your head against a wall, and then just watching people be poor, be hungry, be houseless.”

[CTA: Donate to Riverside food bank?]

HED: Rowing Upstream: Looking ahead to tackle food insecurity

Today’s momentum and tomorrow’s challenges when tackling food insecurity in Riverside

BY: Aloysius Wong

Anchor links to each of our stories:

- <https://thegreenline.to/issue/riverside-food-insecurity/#two-sides-of-riverside>
- <https://thegreenline.to/issue/riverside-food-insecurity/#money-simple-solution>
- <https://thegreenline.to/issue/riverside-food-insecurity/#forgotten-population-seniors>
- <https://thegreenline.to/issue/riverside-food-insecurity/#food-suppliers-inflation>
- <https://thegreenline.to/issue/riverside-food-insecurity/#wraparound-services-food-banks>

[Food insecurity in Riverside is a problem that can be easily overlooked](#) by those unfamiliar with the neighbourhood and its residents. Situated in the broader neighbourhood of South Riverdale, data suggests that the average income of local residents is actually higher than the city-wide average.

But a closer look reveals a deeper divide. Income inequality in Riverside is more pronounced than in the rest of Toronto. There are also more residents in this neighbourhood compared to the rest of the city who don’t speak either of Canada’s official languages, English or French, and therefore struggle to access key services.

What’s more, [seniors in South Riverdale disproportionately experience poverty](#), with 30 per cent of residents 65 and over considered low-income — nearly double the city-wide average of 18 per cent. Programs like Fontbonne Ministries’ Mustard Seed do their best to keep this “forgotten population” afloat while also addressing other issues seniors face, including housing insecurity and loneliness.

IMAGE

[Municipal and provincial politicians advocate for more of these kinds of wraparound services at food banks](#), so that Torontonians needing a range of services can access them all at once. But ultimately, experts say [the best solution to food insecurity is to put more money into the pockets of those who need it most](#).

[Some local businesses in Riverside are working to keep money in people's pockets as much as possible.](#) At the frontlines, independent stores like BlessedLove Caribbean Grocery and Takeout, and Butchers of Distinction, try to maintain affordable prices for customers while coping with supply chain issues and inflation.

IMAGE

There's much more work to be done, and many of these community leaders stressed that the short-term solutions currently in place can't last forever. They say long-term systemic change in both Riverside and other Toronto neighbourhoods requires government policy that addresses the root causes of food insecurity.

For now, we invite you to think about that imaginary low-income family of four in Riverside. With [average rents for a new lease of a two-bedroom apartment in Toronto now exceeding \\$3,200 per month](#), families like this one will continue to feel increased financial pressure, further limiting their ability to access healthy food.

These families will need help to survive and thrive in our city — from elected officials and community leaders, yes, but also from local businesses and fellow residents. Every one of us. Because at the end of the day, there should only be one side of Riverside: a Riverside that's liveable for everyone.

<https://otter.ai/u/gbpmi77PHwaWwS3pE6HrSQzq7vo>

ROUGH WORK

More than donations: How can we help food banks better serve their community? Can We Help Food Banks Level Up?

Also located on Toronto-Danforth ward is The Neighborhood Foodhub. A community initiative founded by —, it is a food bank Foodbank that provides wraparound services such as —.

In order to compensate its employees they use an innovative — model that —.

Models like these may be increasingly necessary to help sustain food banks in Riverside until more long-term policy solutions can be established.

IMAGE

In conclusion

“I would say that people are getting squeezed harder and harder every month,” says Peter Tabuns, leader of the Ontario NDP and MPP for the Toronto-Danforth riding where Riverside is located. “Over the last two years the demand for food bank services has gone up dramatically. Until action is taken by the government that's really substantial, this problem is not going to go away. It's not going to be solved and that results in a lot of misery”.

FWWhile food banks may only be band-aids covering a problem that needs to be addressed with surgery and stitches. But until longer term measures are implemented, they're often the only defense many Torontonians have against hunger. Without proper support, they will tear at the seams. , we must ensure that they do not tear before further intervention is possible. This would leave many Torontonians without any defense against hunger.

[CTA: Donate to Riverside food bank?]

That being said, Dyson notes that the organization has been working on long-term solutions to food insecurity. This includes conducting research to monitor the spread of food insecurity throughout Toronto as well as surveys to better understand which wraparound services

Peter Tabbins

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"Well, I think they're the same causes you'll see all over Toronto and all over Ontario. Wages are too low. The minimum wage is too low. We don't have enough in the way of support for ODSP or OW. Those rates are far too low. They need to be doubled. We're in a situation where we don't have real rent control, so people are seeing rents go through the roof. Often when I talk to people who are having difficulty accessing food, they go back to the fact that after they pay rent they have almost nothing left. And on top of that, and related to rent is that we don't have the level of affordable housing built in this riding and, frankly, across Ontario, that gives people a break from market rates. So it's largely a question of people with low and lower incomes, being hard pressed by daily expenses. And if we're gonna solve the hunger problem, we have to solve the income problem and housing problems".

Paula Fletcher

Well, interesting question because the I'd like to talk about a bit broader, but the Riverside has become quite gentrified over the last while and particular after the Toronto Community Housing revitalization Dawn, that seemed to spurred a lot of development on the east side of the river, particularly Queen Riverside area.

I would say one of the issues is there's a lot of there's a lot of higher end restaurants now food restaurants, whereas before there were far more affordable restaurants with just kind of regular type food

"I think that our food hub at Gerard at Glen Rhodes Church, our food hub is now considered to be the template for food banks so that you simply don't have a food bank that people are going into and leaving. But our wraparound services there for low income people are nice to come together there are courses and healthy eating and test kitchens and things like that. Recently, the organization's moved in to use that kitchen so having a kitchen and Food Bank and an organization that can bring people together is the model that we're working on and I'm very

proud of our work at the food hub because it's now considered to be the template moving forward for food and food insecurity in the city. Social Development Finance Administration is looking at that all I tend to also not just look at food insecurity because once you having problems with food, then you might be having problems with rent you're going to be having problems in other ways. So it's got to be a larger wraparound view. But of course, food and housing are the top two difficult issues for low income people in the city of Toronto in every neighborhood where there are low income people”.

Dianne (Daily Bread)

Riverside is a neighborhood that is undergoing some radical change over the past few decades. It's a neighborhood where we've seen family and household incomes rise, but there is also still a strong presence of people who are working class. People who are in social housing people who are in supportive housing. So food insecurity still persists in throughout the East End. And we do have to, if I remember not looking at a map, at least one of our new banks is servicing right off above you so it's a neighborhood, like most of them in Toronto, where people do face food insecurity.

Both interesting questions, and you might have to remind me a beach because I'm a bear for mind. I can remember one question at a time. So the first question for the headway improve a food bank with RB permanent or temporary stopgap? Absolutely. We, we were established under the banner that we were there just to stem the growing hunger that was happening as the economic recession of the 1980s was was occurring. And we had always positioned ourselves as temporary. We've never taken funding or almost ever taken funding from government. We rely on charitable donations and it's really its neighbors helping neighbors and nobody should go hungry. We will be free thing is that we want to be obsolete. That is nobody should need to rely on a food bank. But we know that there are growing levels of food insecurity and that the food insecurity levels are going to be more severe. That is that if you're worrying about whether you can afford to get all the groceries you want, that's considered food insecurity. But if you're actually skipping meals, if you're if you've got a whole day without food, those are the most some of the more severe kinds of food insecurity. I think that those levels are rising. I think one of the reasons that we're seeing more seniors coming to food banks, for instance, because their dollar is just not stretching as far. So in the ideal world, there would be no need for food banks and we would all go find different jobs. Within the meantime. There are there were to face hunger every day in the city and we need to make sure they're okay. We also know some people like good researchers that use t value drastic that we are not feeding all the hunger that is there. We don't make people only come to us after they run out of run their bank account down after their friends and family says like I can't help you anymore. After they face some other sort of critical incident.

We are the last resort and we've got some of the stats to show that if we're not feeding everybody who's hungry, that means there's a whole lot more people who can be coming to us as things grow worse. So that's the long winded answer to your question. Are we a stop gap or permanent solution? We don't want to be a permanent solution. Because we don't want to be a permanent solution. We also do a lot of work in building the evidence for what's going on in our

city around poverty and advocating talking to government decision makers regularly about the changes that need to happen. Right. Question I think was about how can we improve food banks and that's something that everyone from the people that send the milk out the door from our giant fridge, making sure that it's been stored at the right temperature to our programs. Officers that are going and visiting food banks across the city close to 200 different food programs by January now to us, sitting in research and advocacy, trying to think through what's going to make it better. That's something that we have to do in the past few years, we started taking a much stronger human rights approach. That's why most food banks in the city have gotten rid of the need to show us what your income is before we give you food. It's just your hair. We know that you need it. So there's not that same vetting process. The registration process when you start has volunteered questions around that. But that so that we can feed it back to governments? The average income of people we're seeing is this or the average family size or the age of people we're seeing. So while we still do ask questions, they're not required anymore. And it changed the way that we offer food to so it used to get a box of litter bag of food. Now you can come in and shoot off at many places COVID restrictions allowing you can come in and choose what kind of food you want.

median annual income you know that's the half above half a blow was \$12,732. And how many people came? How many people are we seeing? In November we had 209,000 visits

One of the stress points that's happening right now is that almost all foods are doing this on Volunteer. Volunteer power. And volunteers, especially a few years into this pandemic are really tired because they are now serving to often two or three times the number that they used to pre pandemic. Right. And that's actually heartbreaking

And there was a lovely group of they call themselves church ladies back in the early 2000s, who put together a whole song because they said we suppose we'd make when we were in our 50s we're in our 70s Now, can we retire before we're 90? I mean, that was the challenge that they brought to all the different public policy deputations. The need isn't going away. Did you?

We actually do that right on site because we have a food bank on site and then we have information and referral services where we can help people find the rent bank, get a mattress, you know where the job boards are, get eyeglasses all of those things are sort of basic questions. form filling is a big thing. If you're new to the country, you don't know what's government benefits might be available for all sorts of good things like that. And many of our food banks are located co located are run by multi service agencies. We are doing a study right now with two professors at University of Toronto where we've been out and talk to 800 clients about looking at that question of what works for you best some of those standalone ones where you can just dip in and out or do you want some Do you want more wraparound services? So we'll know the answer to that in another five or six months, as the results come back,

I mean, I've gotten to the whole income. First up, I was a young single mom that lives in the neighborhood. So I was one of those people that visited friends when they were serving dinner

and things like that. Oh, how generous of you. I think I think it's hard. Here's my my comments and one thing to be poor and all the challenges you have to face. It's another thing when you're poor and everybody else around you is higher income and taking vacations and going away on weekends to their cottage and things like that. You not only feel the way to being poorer than you feel weighted being an equal and there's really good sociology research, which shows that an unequal society is more damaging than being in a poor neighborhood. If you have to go up in one of those two neighborhoods. It's easier when everybody else is sort of fighting the same fight as you when you're the one that feels left out, pushed out those scars. Yeah, I mean,

what do you think? Everything we're done kind of as correctly as possible, like we expanded social benefits. Did everything properly. How long do you think it would take for us to completely well, to reduce food insecurity in a meaningful way?

I don't think it would take long at all. I think that the early days of watching the basic income pilot was run here and that's been also I think that's been going on at VI now this. There was the original one in Manitoba. We've seen that people when they know that they're gonna have an adequate income. That is secure that is that they can count on it and plan around it. Begin to make changes for themselves and move to safer housing with bugs or the right with the right number of bedrooms. They will go back to school and get different qualifications and credentials, they will begin to eat healthier, they'll do all the right things and move them out but the problem often with poverty is that you're facing so many different barriers and so many different fronts. You know, you can't afford your diabetes, the test your blood, but you also can't afford the food that you're supposed to eat and then you end up taking too many sick days and then you lose your job and it just cascades like that. But the problem of poverty is that there's so many things that you have to change and attack that you can't just go to night school and lift yourself up. There's the solution to insecurity is making sure that people have secure income and adequate incomes. Thank you.