

The Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank

Introduction

The Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank (CSHFB) is a food bank with a difference. Besides helping people put food on the table, it also feeds people's desire to be accepted as capable, contributing members of their community. This article describes the numerous programs and services through which the Food Bank supports its members as they pursue these goals. Three of these programs were developed and implemented in partnership with Opportunities 2000 (OP2000), an innovative community initiative seeking to reduce poverty in Waterloo Region.

Opportunities 2000 is a project of the Lutherwood Community Opportunities Development Association in Waterloo Region. The organization has been working over the past four years with various community partners to develop initiatives that enhance employability and reduce poverty. The goal has been to help move 2,000 households out of poverty by the year 2000. The Caledon Institute is contributing to the learning, dissemination and evaluation components of the project. OP2000 is funded by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, the Royal Bank and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

Like the Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank, OP2000 aspires to support people in their efforts to be full and active members of their community. However, while OP2000 focusses on helping people secure employment and improve their incomes, the Food Bank offers complementary programming which addresses the self-esteem issues that are central to capacity-building. In order to fully appreciate the projects on which CSHFB and OP2000 have collaborated, these programs are discussed in the light of the Food Bank's overall mandate and activities.

For some of our clients, the Food Bank is their first point of contact with a community support organization. As such, it offers an opportunity for people to learn more about community resources and to consider the idea of becoming involved in other CSHFB programs. We believe that our organization is where poverty meets hope.

Our programs and services were developed around a set of core values, namely:

- people need to learn at their own pace
- everyone learns at a different rate

- individuals need to feel safe and accepted in order to grow to their potential
- everyone is entitled to dignity and respect
- people deserve the best quality of life that they can achieve.

We work to dispel the societal attitude that people who access a food bank are ‘not good enough’ and are ‘less than’ everyone else. Our goal is to have everyone walking out feeling better than when they came in.

Background

The Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank serves the City of Cambridge and Township of North Dumfries, which have a combined population of approximately 130,000. Cambridge is located west of Toronto and a half-hour drive from Kitchener-Waterloo. The manufacturing sector has long been a key source of employment for local residents, but in recent years, the number of small business and consulting companies has increased. Cambridge is an amalgamation of the towns of Preston, Hespeler and Galt. The three former town centres provide the anchors of what is now a triangular-shaped municipality. The Food Bank is located in what used to be Galt – a highly accessible part of the city. We are currently renovating our new premises near the bus station, and hope to have completed our move there by early 2001.

The Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank first opened its doors in 1984. Born out of the recession of the early 1980s, the organization originally was founded by members of social service, community and religious organizations, a lawyer and several community members. While program funding comes principally from the

United Way of Cambridge and North Dumfries, many individuals and groups have continued over the years to support our work. About 800 families are helped each month, and 29 community organizations are provided with food. Program costs, salaries, food purchases and associated costs of operation total \$300,000 each year, but the human investments which have been made have enriched the life of the community immeasurably.

The Food Bank employs the equivalent of four and a half paid staff, but volunteers are the key to our success. In 1999, approximately 1,300 community volunteers donated more than 25,000 hours of their time to various programs. Community integration is an important objective. Our volunteers are adults, students, community-assigned workers, co-op students and individuals on work placements (such as members of the Canadian Hearing Society). Community volunteers work alongside co-op members. When people work together, myths are dispelled and judgments based on stereotypes vanish.

From the outset, CSHFB’s work has been founded on the notion that people need to contribute to their own success. Our mission is to offer supplementary food products and assistance to residents in need. We work to foster self-reliance by offering educational opportunities, job training and one-to-one emotional support. Our approach relies on teamwork and cooperation.

Available services

Emergency Food Assistance

CSHFB works in partnership with the Salvation Army to provide people with emergency food assistance six times a year. People

know they can use the service more than four times if the need exists; no one walks out of the food bank without food. In addition to providing food, the Emergency Food Assistance program distributes copies of 'Food Links,' a listing of food assistance programs that are available throughout the week.

Food Co-operative

This program offers people the chance to purchase a membership in a food co-operative. The Food Co-operative is a member of the Waterloo Region Co-op Council and practises the principles adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance. These include:

- open and voluntary membership
- democratic member control
- member economic participation
- autonomy and independence
- education, training and information
- co-operation among co-operatives
- concern for community.

Potential participants attend an orientation session prior to joining. The purpose of this is twofold. It gives individuals a chance to learn the co-ops' policies and procedures, and it gives co-op staff a chance to assess the types of services and supports applicants may want to access.

Those who choose to join the program pay a membership fee of \$8.00 per month. Participants exchange two hours of work for the

groceries they pick up every two weeks. Assignments are chosen according to skill level, interest and life circumstance. For example, individuals can make crafts, be a volunteer driver or work at another community agency closer to home. Foodstuffs received range in value from \$25 to \$65. Co-op members also can visit the co-op daily for bread, pastries, produce and other donated items.

The Food Co-op offers opportunities for members to practise their people skills and prepare for the job market. They learn to work as an effective team and to recognize the talents and contributions of others. Members are encouraged to make choices about the skills they wish to develop. Opportunities exist for improving customer service and computer skills. Members also can participate in other CSHFB programs, including the Community Garden, Community Kitchen, Clothing Exchange, Employment Clothing Room and Peer Support Program. People are encouraged to add these work experiences to their résumés and establish employment references. Job openings are posted.

Monthly membership meetings are held to review concerns, generate solutions, develop new ideas and keep everyone up-to-date on operating procedures. Members also receive periodic newsletters.

By offering co-op members choice in the foods they take and the work they do, staff help them to take greater control over their futures. Members become less isolated as they get to know other members. They start feeling better about themselves. If staff see that a member is ready to learn something more or different, they find learning opportunities that match the person's needs. Members have the freedom to develop at their own pace.

Creativity is sometimes necessary when matching members' experiences and interests to tasks. A carpenter who is unable to work full time, for example, was matched with a drywall installer to conduct a workshop for other co-op members. Those who attended learned valuable skills and the two presenters felt good about sharing their talents. When possible, people with disabilities are encouraged to join the co-op and work assignments are adjusted according to each person's strengths and limitations.

Craft Program

One of the co-op's newest developments is the Craft Program. Through the Craft Committee, members solicit materials donations from co-op members and local church groups. Participants make crafts as their work contribution giving the finished products to the Food Bank as items for sale. Proceeds are returned to

the Craft Program to allow the purchase of materials to be used by crafters or to teach a new craft to members. The Craft Committee decides what to do with the proceeds from sales.

Good Food Box

This program offers boxes of fresh produce for a reasonable price. An organization in Toronto collects produce and packages it for delivery to cities in southern Ontario. Staff pick up and deliver the boxes to participating families that pay between \$10 and \$20 for the boxes in advance. The Food Bank's staff are researching possibilities for using local growers as suppliers for a similar, locally operated program. Several local farmers already provide us with donations on a regular basis, and we would be interested in strengthening the ties between the people who grow our food and the people who use our services.



A community volunteer learns to maintain the Food Bank's database. More than 1,000 volunteers contribute to the food Bank's work every year.

Small Steps to Success

The Small Steps to Success pilot project was a joint initiative of the Food Bank and the YWCA of Cambridge. It was encouraged by OP2000 and received financial assistance from a special fund provided by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and administered by OP2000. The eight-month program offered pre-employment assistance to women. It was developed with the participation of ten women who had worked in the Food Co-operative, and it was seen as a way of addressing chronic barriers to employment.

As the program name suggests, the goal was to allow all participants to move one step further in their lives. Long-term solutions to poverty are found as individuals experience the safety and support of the group. Additional goals of the program were to help participants gain self-esteem and self-confidence, recognize their strengths and abilities, choose a career path, make whatever educational decisions that path required and gain practical job experience.

Program participants attended a 12-week training program which offered many opportunities to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. All ten women took part in a non-mandatory, four-week job placement. For some, the experience of having to report for work every day at the same place and the same time was extremely challenging. Most found retail positions, one was employed as a janitor and was placed in an administrative position.

All participants felt that the program's most vital component was the one-to-one counselling and support they received from the program coordinator. Her willingness to spend extra time planning solutions and strategies was

the key ingredient in helping these women move forward with their lives. All noted improvements in their self-confidence and personal satisfaction. Nine are now employed and one has returned to school; all felt they had moved a step further in their lives.

The pilot program was such an overwhelming success that we decided to operate a second program which we launched in September 2000. The program's successful pilot was its best advertisement. New participants approached us to sign up; others were referred to the program by Food Bank outreach workers. There is now a waiting list for the next session. Some funding for the current project comes from the United Way and other funding avenues are being explored.

CAPACITY for Growth

This second OP2000-fostered, HRDC-funded program is a joint effort of neighbourhood groups, the Food Bank and counselling service agencies. CAPACITY for Growth was a pilot project in which personal and employment counselling was offered on-site at neighbourhood centres and the Food Bank. This arrangement made the services more accessible to people who found it difficult to visit the counselling agencies' main offices. It also allowed personal and employment counselling to be integrated with a range of other programs and services provided by the Food Bank and other sites.

Interested CSHFB members worked with counsellors to develop action plans to address personal issues and employment needs. In some cases, a variety of personal matters including family violence, legal issues, and alcohol or drug abuse problems needed to be addressed prior to



The Small Steps to Success program provides support to women pursuing their personal and employment goals.

pursuing employment goals. In other situations, employment issues were the main focus of attention (e.g., career counselling, accessing appropriate education and training, or developing effective job search skills). A key strength of the CAPACITY for Growth project was its effort to respond to specific needs. Plans of action were customized to the circumstances of individual participants. Counsellors maintained contact with participants as required.

Based on this pilot project, additional funding was obtained to continue at least some aspects of the CAPACITY for Growth project. This funding is crucial for covering the costs involved in decentralizing and integrating these services, and for removing the fees (e.g., for personal counselling services) that CSHFB members otherwise might have to pay. Such fees likely would pose an insurmountable barrier to their receiving these valuable sources of support.

Community Outreach

Community Outreach is available at the Food Bank to offer support for families with children. The outreach worker's role is to assess the needs of households and search out the appropriate resources. If these cannot be found, the outreach worker can provide money to help purchase the required item or service. Funding is provided by the National Child Benefit program and administered by the Regional Municipality of Waterloo.

One-to-one computer coaching

Individualized coaching is a new service that engages volunteers to help people acquire basic computer skills needed to participate in many aspects of life. Sometimes individuals are too intimidated or lack the financial resources to

enroll in a computer course. They need the one-on-one attention this program offers.

Peer Support Program

This program offers training and supervision to co-op members who want to learn new skills and assume more responsibility within the Food Bank. Participants are offered training in communication skills, customer service, conflict resolution, teamwork, problem solving, and health and safety practices. They are taught where to go for information, when and how to make referrals to other agencies and how to conduct outreach and orientation activities.

CSHFB staff believe that clients need the support and encouragement of others to become more self-reliant. Peer Supporters act as role models, coaches and friends to people who access the Food Bank's programs and services. While helping to improve the quality of service, Food Bank members gain job-related experience and increase their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Future Quest

Future Quest is a joint initiative of Human Resources Development Canada and the Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank. Other supporters of the project include the Community Participation and Job Enhancement programs of the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. Future Quest supports people to update and improve their renovation skills using the new food bank renovation site. The program offers on-the-job, one-to-one supervision, job references, job placement opportunities and a strong chance of obtaining employment in one of the building trades.

We are currently helping people find work by directly approaching potential employers and encouraging them to hire Future Quest participants as they would any other employee. If employers hesitate to hire new staff, we offer financial support and training through the Region of Waterloo's enhanced job placement program. Our aim is to provide participants with real-life work experiences that will lead to full-time employment. We anticipate that the philosophy of the Small Steps program will hold true with Future Quest – individual attention and support can ensure a successful future.

Future directions

With the assistance of OP2000, Wilfrid Laurier University has expanded its partnership with nonprofit agencies throughout Waterloo Region. Through this program, MBA students complete work placement terms in nonprofit organizations. In exchange for providing a student with real-life job experience, the Food Bank will learn more about improving service delivery and becoming more efficient and self-reliant. A change in structure and outlook will ensure our future and make it easier for us to form partnerships with other community organizations.

The Food Co-operative is just beginning to realize its potential as a means of helping people to become more self-reliant. In addition to the programs outlined, plans exist to develop a community kitchen and garden as a source of revenue. Local food-related businesses are being approached to discuss the possibility of outsourcing parts of their operations. Taking in short-term contract work will allow us to give employment opportunities for people whose life circumstances require a flexible work schedule or whose skills could improve if they received one-on-one coaching.

To help clients improve their access to technology, CSHFB is working in partnership with other community agencies to submit a proposal that will request seven Cambridge sites for the Community Access Program (CAP). CAP is a partnership among the federal, provincial, regional and municipal governments, the private sector and community organizations, and is funded by Industry Canada. It is meant to ensure wide-spread Internet access, especially for low-income, disadvantaged and younger Canadians.

CSHFB recently has received funding to hire a person for six months to develop a Seniors' Program and to look at a barter system within the co-op. Focus groups will be initiated and partnerships will be developed to ensure our seniors are, and will, receive food services.

Our experiences have taught us that when people have lived in poverty for generations, they find it difficult to have hope for the future and a vision for change. We have learned that a respectful, caring, individualized approach is key to unlocking the poverty trap.

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