

Alternatives to Food Banks

Introduction

This paper describes the Alternatives Program and other services provided by Agincourt Community Services Association (ACSA). The purpose of this program is to help low-income households stretch their food dollars, gain self-confidence, improve their eating habits and enhance their lifestyles.

Agincourt Community Services was established in 1970 by the outreach committees of seven local churches which saw the need to coordinate social services in the area. In the beginning, the Knox United Church donated the services of their minister on a part-time basis for six months. The minister assisted with the start-up of the organization: setting up the Board of Directors, hiring staff and incorporating the association. Today, there are approximately 20 different faith groups which help support ACSA services. These faith groups provide ACSA with space for programs, contributions for the food bank, board members, service volunteers, in-kind donations and contacts to other sources of support.

ACSA offers legal counselling, income tax services, Creative Play programs, brown bag luncheons, transportation, a job bank, an emergency food bank, community information services and holiday activities, such as a Christmas partners program.

Emergency food assistance

Agincourt Community Services has been operating an Emergency Food Bank for about 25 years. The main sources of food are local churches, schools, businesses and private donations. As a member of the Daily Bread Food Bank, ACSA is able to ensure the availability of food for its clients.

Community members residing in the Agincourt area can use this service when they don't have money to purchase food. The food bank supplies meals for a maximum of three days or nine meals. The food provided at the bank is prepared according to the Canadian Food Guide. Community members are able to use the Emergency Food Bank up to six times per year; the majority of food bank users are single parents on welfare. There is a greater demand for food near the end of the month, when funds are running low.

A hand up

Since requests for emergency food were increasing constantly, ACSA's Board of Directors devised a program to help low-income households in a more permanent way. The food bank is intended only as a temporary form of assistance. ACSA's goal in the

past few years has been to complement this temporary assistance with a ‘hand up’ – i.e., the Alternatives Program.

The main objectives of the Alternatives Program are to:

- increase awareness of sustainable alternatives to emergency food provision
- develop practical methods for food recipients to stretch their food dollars
- raise awareness in the local community about alternative methods of ensuring food security for low-income residents.

The following activities have been developed within the Alternatives Program.

Consultation

During a consultation period, food bank recipients are interviewed by the Program Coordinator. Knowledge of each individual’s personal situation allows the counsellor to provide appropriate assistance and make proper referrals. Clients receive support and information on training courses, employment opportunities and upcoming workshops as well as referrals from the Information Scarborough database of programs and services in Toronto.

Cooking Club

The Cooking Club meets twice a month for a planning and cooking session. This club allows community members to prepare meals in large quantities. The program is designed to improve participants’ skills in preparing low-cost nutritious food, learn about healthy eating habits, sample food from different cultures, feel part of the community and overcome isolation.

After preparing the meal, members eat together and socialize. They then take the remaining food home to store and share with their families. Members also take part in skill-sharing sessions where they learn crafts such as knitting, crocheting and T-shirt

decoration. These sessions are led by talented group members and are helpful for those who may not have the self-confidence to recognize and market their handiwork. These activities allow people to meet in an informal, friendly and dignified atmosphere where they can share information and receive support when they feel overwhelmed with personal problems. There are three cooking clubs currently in operation, two of which are administered by the ACSA.

Community Economic Development (CED)

As a result of their involvement with the Cooking Club, some of the participants have developed the necessary skills to operate a small catering business. This CED project is assisting them in entering the job market and will supplement their income to help them move off welfare.

Good Food Box

The Good Food Box is a ‘field to table’ service operated in partnership with Foodshare. The box contains a variety of in-season fruits and vegetables and is available in various types and sizes. The fee for the box is paid during first week of each month. Prepayment enables members to pay when welfare cheques are first received and money is available. The boxes are delivered at the end of the month when families often find that money is running low.

‘Pick Your Own’ trips

Pick Your Own trips enable low-income community members to travel to local farms to pick their own fruits and vegetables. Members get fresh produce, enjoy the outdoors and save money. Transportation usually is provided by ACSA volunteer drivers. Pick Your Own trips also encourage preschool children to participate with their parents.

A Jam Session is held after each trip. At these workshops, members are given tips on how to preserve excess food. The sessions also make them aware

that they can buy in-season fruit at a lower cost and preserve it for later use. Jam Session activities include making jam, jelly, fruit pies, apple sauce and apple crisp. Community members also learn how to properly freeze and preserve vegetables. At the end of the season, farmers often allow 'gleaning' visits and provide fruits and vegetables free of charge.

Agincourt Community Garden

Agincourt Community Garden is one of the most successful activities of the Alternatives Program. The garden was established in 1994 as a strategy to reduce hunger and poverty. Like other Alternatives Program activities, it is designed to help community members improve their health and well-being during difficult financial circumstances.

Agincourt Community Garden provides community members, many of whom are economically disadvantaged, with the opportunity to grow fresh and nutritious food to supplement their family income. Community gardening helps reduce stress, ensures access to healthy organic foods, stretches food dollars, builds a sense of community, educates children on how food is grown and, most importantly, allows members to have fun as a family while working on their gardens. The Community Garden also has been identified as an important therapeutic tool for psychiatric patients.

Initially, there were six garden plots shared by 15 families. Due to the garden's great success and popularity in 1995, it expanded to 20 plots shared by 26 families. Since then the number of families has been increasing. Gardeners receive gardening tips and information as well as support and supplies from ACSA and from each other. Members who are directly involved in the gardening are not the only ones to benefit from this initiative: The produce from the garden is shared with family and friends and a portion of the food is donated to the food bank. For many Community Garden members, this donation is a way of showing appreciation and making a contribution to the community.

A second garden was initiated in June 1998 in partnership with Ontario Hydro and with support

from Toronto Parks and Recreation, Scarborough Region. This garden is located on Ontario Hydro property and consists of 42 plots. Produce is shared among community members and sold to help sustain the program.

Workshops

Workshops are conducted on a regular basis to inform community members about food security issues. Members who actively participate in Alternatives Program activities play a major role in choosing workshop topics. These include employment and résumé writing, nutrition and health, budgeting, exercise, hairdressing, cake decorating, crafts, adult education and Shiatsu.

Sessions take place in local churches and are publicized in local newspapers and on cable television. On-site babysitting enables mothers with young children to attend these sessions and transportation is often provided.

Budgeting and cooking

In this seven-week course, participants learn about daily budget planning, food labels, nutrition, health and meal planning. Participants learn to get the best buys for their dollars through shopping tips such as bulk purchase, coupon collection and buying store brands.

Nutritious Snack program

Studies show that a large percentage of children go to school hungry and, as a result, are less attentive in the classroom. In order to address this problem, ACSA started a Nutritious Snack program at a local school in November 1995. Thanks to volunteers, approximately 50 students now have a healthy snack of fresh muffins and juice every morning and benefit from a healthy start to their day. Parents also receive information on the importance of good nutrition.

Information dissemination

As part of ACSA's dissemination work, a one-day conference was held in April 1997 to share information on successful food security models. It also offered the 81 participants an opportunity to develop an initial plan of action for networking in their communities.

Elements of success

Various factors have contributed to the success of the Alternatives Program. Dedicated staff members, including an Executive Director, Alternatives Program Coordinator and Volunteer Coordinators, encourage community members' participation, make clients feel welcome and ensure that the program is running smoothly.

Our credibility within the community is also an important factor. ACSA has been in operation for more than 26 years, knows the community, is aware of potential donors and has a network of support. This track record helps generate a positive response when we require in-kind donations such as physical space, technical assistance and printing.

Other factors that contribute to the success of the Alternatives Program include:

- being a small organization that can change directions quickly
- having many services available in one place (e.g., information, food bank, access to clients, access to solutions)
- a supportive community environment
- an organizational history of working with volunteers
- flexible funding sources and community donations
- an attitude of equality and respect between staff and participants.

One important outcome of the Alternatives Program is the exposure to cultural diversity. Members participating in the program have the opportunity to work with others from various cultures, learn about different traditions and customs, and establish mutually respectful friendships. This under-

standing is an important element in building community capacity: Knowledge of another culture helps dissipate suspicion. The opportunity to work together to accomplish a particular task draws people closer by demonstrating what they have in common. It provides support in their struggle against poverty.

Conclusion

ACSA was the first organization in Scarborough to offer an Alternatives Program and is the only agency to provide these practical, hands-on activities from one location.

ACSA is being asked to share its experience and expertise with communities interested in establishing a similar program. Finding ways to disseminate our learning is another challenge. ACSA representatives have travelled across Ontario to talk about how the Alternatives Program has helped people cope with poverty by eating healthier on a limited budget. The program itself does not eradicate poverty. But self-sufficiency may be the first step to exiting poverty.

Fahima Biglar

Fahima Biglar is Coordinator of the Alternatives Program. The program has received funds from The Trillium Foundation and Health Canada to disseminate information about the program across Ontario. A broadcast-quality video has been produced about the program. Copies of the video are available free of charge by calling (416) 321-6912.

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