

Tottenham Beeton food bank supporting the community through COVID-19

As New Tecumseth continues to battle COVID-19, a local food bank has reshaped its services in an effort to stop the virus's spread.

"We've gone to pre-made bags ? trying to minimize the contact people have with one another," said Robine Hawkes, President of Our Town Food Bank, serving Tottenham and Beeton.

"We have a physically small food bank as well, so that was source of concern; we wouldn't have been able to maintain social distancing as effectively."

In the past, the format of the food bank was a shopping environment, where users could select the items they wanted on a points system, but, since March 10, they introduced hampers.

Additionally, the Our Town Food Bank is only allowing one person inside their facility at a time to pick up pre-packaged hampers.

The food bank has also reduced its services from weekly to bi-weekly because of COVID-19.

Since the virus started effecting the community, Hawkes said they're seeing more familiar faces that have accessed their services in the past.

"We have 120 registered users but?on a busy evening we'd normally see less than 70," she noted. "Now we're starting to see all sorts of people that we haven't seen in a while."

Seasonal work has come to a halt due to COVID-19 and many of the families who use the food bank have been anticipating a return to work this spring, Hawkes told the Times.

Due to many being unemployed, as non-essential businesses were recently closed by the Province, Hawkes said the demand at the food bank will only increase.

"I don't think we've seen the worst of it yet," Hawkes stressed. "I think May and June are going to be very interesting times for the food bank.

"We're really not out there advertising our needs because we haven't seen our usage jump yet but we are anticipating that during the summer when we don't traditionally get donations, we are going to be suffering," she added.

Roughly 40 percent of the individuals the food bank serves are children and a majority of users are single parents.

"That is one of the areas I'm really concerned about as we go forward with schools being closed," Hawkes noted.

"I know the food programs in our area aren't very strong, but it still is an opportunity for kids to be identified as needing access to food outside of what we provide."

Meanwhile, maintaining a solid inventory at the food bank has become a challenge as New Tecumseth's grocery stores face shortages.

"All the stuff that we generally use are the things that have been short on the shelves," said Hawkes, who noted volunteers had difficulty purchasing Kraft Dinner for their very first time.

"There's also a limit on things, so how do you stock a food bank in that kind of situation when you're not part of the larger food

buying organizations??

Other issues for volunteers have revolved around safety.

Hawkes said they are predominately over the age of 65, so ensuring their protected from the potential becoming infected is a priority, as the virus has a higher mortality rate among seniors.

There's been a lower number of volunteers due to the novel coronavirus as well, but the food bank is managing, she added.

Hawkes said they welcome any support the community can provide. The Foodland in Beeton and Tottenham are both accepting non-perishable donations.

The New Tecumseth Joint Operations Centre in Beeton has also set up a drop box where people can donate cheques, gift cards, and cash. Mark the donations for ?Our Town Food Bank,? so the operations centre staff know who the donations are for.

The food bank was closed over Easter weekend but will reopen April 21.

Anyone with a cough or fever is asked to not come to the food bank and call 905-936-6293 to make alternative arrangements.

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