

Alliston food bank to relocate in December

The volunteer-run Good Shepherd Food Bank in Alliston is upsizing in December to a bigger location as it sees a growing number of people accessing its services.

The total amount of food they're providing to the community has more than doubled since March, when COVID-19 shutdown the economy, leaving many unemployed and unable to make ends meet.

At the current rate, Good Shepherd Food Bank will provide around 270,000 pounds of food to the community annually.

"Over the past few years, we have been challenged by the limited space we have for clients shopping as well as for the storage of donated food," said David Bradbury, Good Shepherd Vice President.

"We have made some changes to accommodate these pressures, but when COVID-19 was declared this March we had to make some drastic changes in the way we operate to protect the health of our clients and our volunteers."

"Over the summer, we realized we cannot continue to operate without a much larger facility and a safer workplace for volunteers," he added.

The new location increases the Good Shepherd's footprint from under 2,000 square feet to 3,000 square feet.

"That's going to make a world of difference for us for storage," Bradbury said.

New Tecumseth Council has helped to subsidize the food bank for 26 years, offsetting its rent costs which are now going from \$1,400 a month to \$2,400.

In an effort to cover the rising costs and number of clients Good Shepherd serves, Bradbury requested that Town Council help cover the \$1,000 increase in rent costs each month.

In lieu of Bradbury's request to Council, Deputy Mayor Richard Norcross moved a motion to have Town staff review available funding in their grants and donations budget, so they can make a donation, which passed unanimously.

The budget will come forward at Council's next meeting, November 2, at which time they'll allocate funding, if enough is available.

Bradbury noted the money will go a long way to help the food banks support its increase in users, which grew significantly over the last month.

"Our clients have come to us for a number of reasons, but the underlying main reason is the lack of affordable housing. All it takes is a lost job, health issues, or low wages to bring in more clients seeking assistance," he said

"With the current increase in local house prices this will only get worse. Remember, our clients come to us out of need."

The food bank has introduced a hamper program where they hand out bags of nutritious food items, including produce, which has to be changed each week to avoid clients receiving the same items repeatedly, Bradbury explained.

"By doing this, the food costs have increased per client, even with increased food supplies through Feed Ontario," he said.

"We believe with our move to our new facility we can again sort and warehouse donated food and it will help us bring our food costs down."

The food bank increased its annual food purchasing budget from \$105,000 to \$160,000 in July as clients were not able to choose what they wanted from its shelves before that time.

With the launch of the organization's new website, Bradbury said they hope to include online shopping for clients with pre-arranged pick up times.

"Later we hope to be able to even set up a drive-thru system in the parking lot for pick ups. This is all striving for the no contact ? being able to safely help our clients,?" he noted.

"Our food bank has become a critical social support for our community; we not only help our clients but we also help local women shelters, mental health and addiction services. We provide food to citizens who find themselves in the most stressful of situations.?"

As schools closed in March the food bank also focused on providing extra nutritious snacks to school age children in client's families who were no longer able to receive support through the student nutrition programs offered locally.

Through the years, it has strived to keep overhead expenses as low as possible to provide maximum support and benefit back to the local community.

"Our volunteers love to help those in need and those in need love our help,?" said Bradbury.

"We are a necessary part of our community. Before COVID-19 arrived, I was always amazed to see the number of hugs exchanged between our volunteers and clients ? that's no more."

The food bank has had a large impact on the clients it serves. One gentleman who recently passed away donated his death benefit as a dying wish, noted Bradbury.

The food bank was able to place 80 \$20 gift cards to its clients to help them have a happy Thanksgiving this year from that donation.

"This is a fine example of our motto 'sharing is caring,?' Bradbury said.

He noted that the Town's support over the years subsidizing rental costs has made it possible for them to feed many mouths in New Tecumseth and allowed the food bank to focus on providing nutritious food to those in the community who can't afford it.

By Sam OdrowskiLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter