



FOOD CHARITY: WHEN DOING OUR BEST IS NOT ENOUGH

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Since their emergence in the 1980s, food banks have come to typify food charity in Canada. Their activity is tracked through annual 'Hunger Counts' produced by a national association. Whether through the publicity campaigns and fundraising efforts of Food Banks Canada or through the food drives of local agencies, food banks are the public face of food charity in our communities. They have also functioned as a sort of lightning rod for countless debates over the most appropriate way to respond to income-related problems of food access (also termed 'food insecurity'). Academics have documented the relation between the growth of food banks and federal and provincial policy reforms that have effectively shredded our social safety net. At the community level, we've witnessed a relentless quest for alternatives to food banks. These include programs that would improve people's access to nutritious food and break out of the charitable mold, yet be mounted and sustained within the confines of community resources. Despite the benefits of these programs, however, it must be kept in mind that there is a whole lot to more food charity than food banks.

Our recent inventory of charitable meal and snack programs providing food to homeless people in Toronto¹ provides a glimpse of the vast expanse of charitable food provisioning that lies beyond food banks. We identified 490 different programs, serving over 120,000 meals per week. In addition to the programs run by shelters and soup kitchens, we found meal and snack programs in drop-in centres, health centres, churches, and education and training programs. Although almost all of these programs relied to some extent on donations, the mainstream purveyors of donated foods in Toronto were only part of their supply system. Less than one-third of the operations we inventoried were affiliated with a food bank. Program operators hustled countless contacts to acquire needed food supplies. They picked up leftovers from nearby stores and coffee shops, made arrangements with friends to get regular donations of coffee or leftovers from business luncheons, and held special fundraising events to

support their programs. Where possible, they also worked to leverage funds from other budget lines in their agencies to purchase needed supplies.

At the same time that a myriad of organizations have independently mounted small charitable food assistance programs and food banks continue to redistribute millions of pounds of food each year, there are countless other acts of food charity occurring daily in our communities. A few years ago, we interviewed over 250 homeless youth in Toronto and learned about all kinds of informal acts of giving². Youth on the street sometimes received 'food drops' - donations of food from passersby. These might be leftovers someone had saved from a restaurant meal, but they were also foods and beverages purchased by the givers for the sole purpose of helping others meet their food needs. Sometimes, the youth received gifts of food from workers in fast food establishments. One youth talked with delight about buying a slice of pizza and having the worker at the counter slip another one in the bag, for free. Several others told of going to the back door of a pizza shop, donut shop, or other fast-food establishment at closing time. As the workers cleaned up for the night, they would bring leftover food out for the waiting youth, rather than discard it as they'd no doubt been instructed to do.

The massive scope of charitable food provisioning identified in our research in Toronto speaks to the enormity of unmet food needs in the city. It also shows just how ready, willing, and able people are to take initiative and act in response to concerns about unmet food needs in their midst. Whether people work together to run meal programs or respond individually by giving some food to a stranger on the street, their actions indicate an implicit acceptance of the dysfunction of our social programs. Charitable food providers take for granted (and rightly so) that individuals without enough to eat will not be able to get assistance from local welfare offices, employment insurance centres, or other social services. People initiate and sustain acts of food charity on the belief that the food they provide is desperately needed, and that if they don't provide it, others will go hungry. So, they mobilize what resources are at their disposal and do their best to help. Unfortunately, their best is not good enough.

After almost two decades of research on household food insecurity in Canada, we now understand a lot about the prevalence and severity of this problem and the circumstances that give rise to it. Survey results indicate that only about one fifth to one quarter of people experiencing income-related barriers to food access seek charitable food assistance. Those who obtain food charity are likely those facing *severe food insecurity*, a condition characterized by serious food deprivation. Even among this highly vulnerable group, though, the use of charitable food assistance is not universal, nor is it enough to prevent people from going hungry³. Despite the extraordinary efforts of countless individuals

and groups to provide food for others, people still end up not meeting their food needs.

Part of the reason that charitable food assistance is ineffective in meeting the food needs of those who seek help is because it is charity. The capacity of food banks and other charitable food programs to provide assistance depends on their supplies, and these depend on donations. Needs for food assistance far exceed supplies, so charitable food provisioning is reduced to the simple rationing of whatever food is on hand to those who seek help. Limitations on the frequency with which families can receive food hampers, the size of the hampers, and the availability of meals at meal programs all are factors that restrict access to food assistance. Essentially, the distribution of food assistance is disconnected from clients' actual food needs, and unmet needs are rendered invisible⁴.

The unmet food needs that propel people to seek food charity cannot be solved by charitable acts. If charitable food providers recognize this, perhaps the caring and compassion that underscores these acts of charity can be channeled into the political process. Political reforms are necessary to have a more caring, compassionate social welfare system.

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