

Why Food Banks Don't Work for Everyone

Background

In 2012, four million Canadians were food insecure, but only one million accessed food banks. Food insecure means that you are unable to get the proper healthy food that you need. This means that only 20%-25% of people who are food insecure actually make it to a food bank to receive food. The other 75%-80% are subject to a variety of circumstances and barriers that prevent them from accessing a food bank.

This will give you a sense of how many people successfully access food banks. This exercise is only about access. It does not look at what kind of food is accessed or how much is available.

The 75%-80% of people who do not access food banks can be roughly placed in three categories.

This group of people can't get food from the food bank because they lack identification or have specific dietary needs that the food bank can't meet.

Food banks are dependent on donations so usually have clear criteria about geographic boundaries, income, and acceptable identification, etc. Clear criteria means they can distribute their limited resources to a clearly eligible group and do not need to make subjective decisions with each individual. Individuals themselves often come with criteria about the kind of food they can effectively use. This is determined by health factors, cultural or religious restrictions, allergies or intolerances, cooking facilities or lack of same.

This group of people can't get to the food bank because they have no transportation, the food bank is only open when they are at work, they can't take their children with them, or they need a mobility device and the building is inaccessible.

Food banks have become a necessary and unfortunately vital institution in the alleviation of poverty. However they are still primarily dependent on the kindness of volunteers to run them and benevolent landlords, often churches or other charities, to house them. This means that they can only be open when it is convenient for volunteers and are often housed in buildings with stairs and other physical barriers. If they need to go to a food bank it is because they lack money to buy their own food. That means either sacrificing \$6 worth of food to pay for a transit ride or committing to a long walk. The walk back also includes carrying heavy cans.

This group of people will not ask for help because of what others will think or how it makes them feel about themselves.

Being poor and in need of food is most often the result of circumstances beyond their control. They did not choose to be hungry and the fact that they can't provide for themselves on top of the original circumstances goes a long way to eroding their sense of self and place in the community. Admitting that they need help by publicly asking for help means they are subjecting themselves to the judgement of others. Whether others actually judge them or not, they feel like they have been judged. They might know that some of the volunteers at the food bank are neighbours or go to their church and they are uncomfortable with them knowing they need help. Acquaintances already go to the food bank and they have heard them be quite vicious to people they think do not need to be there. The above reasons or countless others that would lead to humiliation or judging keep you away.

The final 20%-25% need food and are actually able to access the food bank.

Food banks were originally started to fill a need for emergency situations. Now it is not an emergency. It is a necessity for many individuals and families that access them on a regular basis. It is not right that so many people cannot afford to house and feed themselves. Food banks are charities that struggle to meet the needs of those who do walk in their doors. Imagine if all of the people who are food insecure actually accessed food banks? Food banks are not the answer to food insecurity.

Dignity is best when people can go in to the grocery store and buy what they need and pay for it themselves