

Aurora Food Pantry secures new freezers to meet demand thanks to Regional grant



Amid rising demand at the Aurora Food Pantry, new freezers secured with a \$10,000 grant from the Region of York are helping make service delivery easier and foster a sense of normalcy for clients.

The Aurora Food Pantry, located on Industrial Parkway South at Vandorf, unveiled the new sliding door freezers this month, replacing some "ancient" chest freezers that had served the Pantry well but had come to the end of their life.

With transparent doors allowing clients to see the food products inside before making their selection, the Pantry says they have fostered a client experience that is "more professional with a more normal grocery shopping experience."

"It allows us easier distribution to our clients," says Sandra Seepaul, Executive Director of the Aurora Food Pantry. "You can see what's in it, you're not going to lose things like you would at the bottom of a chest freezer, so the product is more appropriately stored and taken care of."

At the end of the day, Seepaul says it's all about "serving clients well" and this means service that is equitable across the board.

"Rice, for instance, comes in packages so if you have a family of one versus a family of five, you want to make sure that family of five is served more product than a family of one, just to make it an equitable service," she says. "We try to make sure that there is something there for everybody, so if a person is gluten-free, we have lactose-free products, and halal meat as well for people who don't eat regular meat. We try to have that kind of variety so everybody can have something they can feel comfortable eating."

In a time where grocery prices are rising and services like the Aurora Food Pantry are stretched ever thinner, maintaining that variety "and equity" can sometimes be a challenging task, but grants like this one from the Region of York, as well as donations of both food and money from community members at large "are integral in filling that gap."

This past December, for instance, saw the highest demand the Food Pantry has seen so far.

January's numbers went down "a little bit" over December of 2023, Seepaul adds, but those figures were still higher than those logged in November of last year.

"You see this as a wave kind of projection as far as numbers," says Seepaul, who sees some clients moving out of Aurora to Richmond Hill or Newmarket in the quest for more affordable housing, a trend that impacts Food Pantry numbers. "Right now, we're just in a place where we're serving higher numbers than we have usually seen. Our numbers have escalated since June and July

of last year [when] we noticed our numbers take steep rise.?

The rise of grocery prices, she adds, has not only impacted the Food Pantry's bottom line, but the amount of donations they have taken in over the last few months.

?Things we normally take for granted that we would get, we're getting a lot less of ? for instance, things like peanut butter. That is much more expensive on the shelf right now and I just ordered half a skid of it because we don't have any right now,? says Seepaul. ?Certainly, the cost of food in grocery stores is impacting the donations we're receiving. A lot of people who used to donate to us, perhaps, are now using us and it's kind of cause and effect ? food prices go up and we get less food.?

If you're able to help with donations, the Food Pantry keeps an updated list online at aurorafoodpantry.ca of its current and most urgent needs which people can purchase and leave at one of several donation bins around the community.

?As soon as the [donated items] come into the building it's going to hit our shelves,? says Seepaul. ?If you look around, you're going to see our donation bins are empty. From our Christmas donations, we've managed to go through everything and that's fast. When it comes to food insecurity, I would like people to think about the root causes of it. If that means what it costs to live in Toronto now ? minimum wage is \$16.50 right now and the living wage in Toronto is \$25. There is a huge discrepancy there. You can be working full time on minimum wage and still not be able to afford to live in Toronto. I think people need to really consider that. I know it is more of a political issue than it is a food bank issue, but those are the direct impacts of why people need to use food banks. If you affect the major causes ? if rent was a little bit cheaper, if gas was a little bit cheaper, if we could get the cost of the food in our grocery store to go down ? all of these things would impact us.

?The goal is always to put food banks out of business. We don't want to be here. It would be nice for people to be aware of the root causes of why people need to use food banks. If there was a political way or voting, using the leverage of their vote to help with that, that's what people need to do.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter