

Food Banks and Soup Kitchens: An Overview¹

Report prepared in response to the questionnaire
addressed to food bank and soup kitchen clients

Presented to

The Department of Social Development
(c/o Ms Debbie McInnis)

By

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¹ This document is in no way intended to pass a negative judgement on the numerous volunteers, employees and managers and others who work in food banks and soup kitchens.

Food Banks and Soup Kitchens: An Overview

A basic affirmation: Accessing food is a human right

Graham Riches wrote² *"It is ironic that Canada recognizes the right to food in a number of international conventions, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which Canada ratified in 1976. Yet there is no mechanism within Canada to ensure that we comply with our international legal commitments, because social and economic rights are deemed to be matters of political - not legal - recourse. Indeed, since the Canada Assistance Plan was scrapped in 1996, it could be argued that Ottawa and the provinces have reneged on these commitments."* Internationally recognizing the human right to food remains empty rhetoric in Canada unless we provide welfare benefits that are adequate to address the nutritional needs of people. In light of that, food banks are an aberration and they should not exist. Their very presence sends the message that Canada is failing to provide its citizens with adequate food to meet their basic need. Food insecurity is first and foremost a problem of income inadequacy. Doctor V. Tarasuk states: "Food banks, meal programs, community kitchens, etc. do little to mitigate the problem; we don't know why the political will cannot be mobilized to address the issue"³. New Brunswick has its share of income-related food insecurities. It was estimated that in N. B., there were 21,000 adults and 5,400 children who were moderately food insecure. Those who were severely food insecure comprised 8,700 adults and 300 children.

Each month thousands and thousands of citizens are forced to go to food banks to avoid being hungry. Some of these people also go to soup kitchens in order not to go to bed on an empty stomach. Is this normal? Is this acceptable? No! Emergency food assistance is not enough. We need a new social order, an economy much more centered on the common good.

Background on food bank utilization

Who are the citizens using food banks and soup kitchens? The major users are people receiving income assistance and their children, minimum-wage workers, the unemployed, people receiving disability-related income supports and seniors.

In 1981, the first food bank was introduced as a short term measure to help people during an economic crisis⁴. It was thought that the situation would disappear within two to three years. Twenty-nine years later, food banks have become part of our landscape. Instead of being seen as an abnormality, they have become a socially accepted reality in Canada as well as in New Brunswick. How can we say we are among the best countries in the world when we see increases in the number of people using food banks?

² www.ccsd.ca/perception/241/fs.htm - article from Graham Riches.

³ Dr Valery Tarasuk, Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of Toronto.

⁴ Opening of the first food bank in Edmonton, Alberta in 1981.

Governments are promoting food banks and, at election time, certain candidates tour them for a photo opportunity. The emphasis should be put on reducing their number and eventually closing them down. Instead, community groups organize a variety of fundraising activities to support them. Some are even using a “Celebrity Chef” to help raise their profile.

Food banks and soup kitchens are a signal of the collapse of our social security net. They are also an indication that our federal and provincial governments as well as some private corporations are not interested in making real changes in the redistribution of wealth. The result is that more citizens live in poverty, therefore more of them dependant on food banks.

Data on the gaps in income distribution

Between 1989 and 2007, the average total income of all families with children has seen dramatic changes. The 10% poorest N. B. families with children have seen their average total **income be reduced by \$278** while **the richest 10% have seen their income rise by \$51,187⁵**. During that time, both at the federal and provincial level, the corporate sector has been able to convince governments that they need to be paying less taxes. In N. B., we have changed our relatively fair tax system from a four-bracket level of taxation to a two-bracket level, namely 9% and 12%, to be in place by 2012. With the 2009 tax modifications, the one-earner family making \$25,000 a year will save \$219 in four years but the family **earning \$100,000 a year will save \$3,076**. It is clear who will be profiting from these regressive changes. The business tax will decrease from 13% to 8% by July 2012 (to 11% in 2010, 10% in 2011 and 8% in 2012), **the lowest rate in Canada**. This means a \$1 billion dollar loss in provincial revenues at the end of four years. This money could have been used to alleviate poverty. There is a real need to change our way of redistributing wealth.

Statistics on food bank utilization

*Food Bank Canada*⁶ reported that in March 2009, there were 794,738 Canadians citizens who went to a food bank, an 18% increase over 2008. In the province of N. B. alone, 17,889 individuals received assistance from its 64 affiliated food banks. **This number represents a 14% increase, compared to 2008**. Children of N. B. represented 34% on the 2009 food bank clients.

The majority (60%) of food bank users are social welfare recipients. Results from the 2006 Census show that within the Moncton city boundaries, there were 11,343 individuals living below the Low Income Cut-off (before tax). In 2006, Moncton had as much as **18%** of its population living in poverty, compared to **13.5%** for the entire province. In 2009, there

⁵ Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Data from Statistics Canada).

⁶ Food Banks Canada. Hunger Count 2009: A comprehensive report on hunger and food bank use in Canada and recommendations for change.

were **4,355 social assistance recipients in Greater Moncton, up from 4,170 a year earlier**. No wonder that Moncton food banks and soup kitchens are in great demand!

In 2009, the *Food Dépôt Alimentaire Inc.* supplied the 23 food banks and soup kitchens situated in a 100-km radius, comprising the counties of Albert, Westmorland and Kent⁷. In this warehouse, donated and purchased foods are processed, sorted, packaged and stored. Almost 2.5 million lbs. (1,134 million kilos) pass through this warehouse every year – enough to fill 85 tractor trailers. In 2009, more than 14,000 volunteer hours were invested in order to feed the hungry families in Southeast N.B.

Members of the Common Front for Social Justice (CFSJ) obtained statistics from *Food Dépôt Alimentaire* on the number of 2008 and 2009 food bank users in Southeast N. B. This is presented in Figure 1 below.

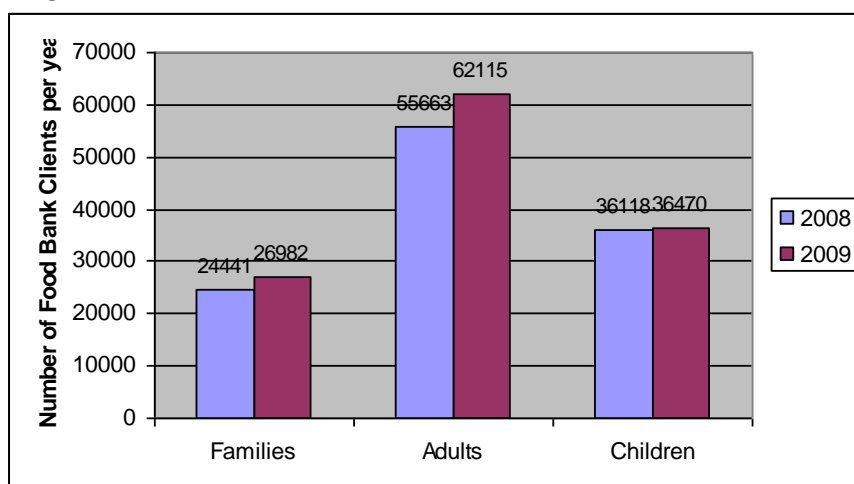


Figure 1. Number of food bank users in Southeast N.B. during 2008 and 2009

In 2009, approximately 26,982 families went to the Moncton area food banks compared to 24,441 families in 2008. **Sadly, this is a 15% increase.**

Sources of donations and funding of Southeast N.B. Food Banks

Food banks mainly stock their shelves with donated goods coming from what grocery stores are unable to sell. These largely include damaged canned goods or items which have passed their expiry date. Periodically, food banks acquire non-perishable items damaged during transportation. They also receive cash donations from the general public. This allows them

⁷ Southeast NB Food Banks: Albert County Action Committee, Albert County Food Bank, Banque de Nourriture de Memramcook, Christian Food Bank, Crossroads for Women Inc., Food Depot Alimentaire, Karing Kitchen Inc., K.C.C.V.A. Food Bank- Rexton, Kent County CVA Food Bank-Richibucto, Le Comité de Bénévolat de Rogersville Inc., Le Vestiaire St.-Jean Baptiste Inc.-Boucrouche, Maison Nazareth Inc., Mobile One Community Services Inc., Open Hands Food Bank, Pedvac Foundation-Port Elgin, Ray of Hope Needy Kitchen Inc., Sackville & District Assistance Centre inc., Shepody Food Bank, St-George Food Bank, Support People of Today-Peticodiac, Sussex Sharing Club Inc., Vestiaire St. Joseph-Shediac, YMCA Community Caring Food Bank-Moncton.

to purchase regular foods from grocery stores or to acquire left-over products after inventory. The generosity of the public peaks during the Christmas season but the operation must go on 52 weeks of the year. Food drives are organized by local groups such as church congregations, Knights of Columbus, the Scout Movement, etc. Certain companies also contribute funds. All this is necessary because the government's contribution to food banks is generally insufficient.

Some information obtained from various area food banks reveals the very low government contribution to food banks. Shediak's *Vestiaire Saint-Joseph* annually receives a grant of \$14,000 from the government, yet it spends over \$100,000 on food alone, excluding its other expenses. *Vestiaire Saint-Joseph*'s survival rests on the profits it generates through the sale of second-hand clothing. The "*Open Hands Food Bank*", which served 14,607 clients in 2009, only received \$17,000 from the government, while its annual expenses were over \$60,000.

The N. B. government should significantly increase the annual grants given to food banks. According to a volunteer⁸, food banks can barely survive with the donations received from community groups and individuals. They could never operate if volunteers were not there. Unless the government is prepared to raise welfare rates to reach the poverty line, it is crucial that more money be injected into food banks to ensure their financial stability.

Food banks need adequate and secure facilities in which to operate. They must have enough cash on hand to carry out repairs in a timely fashion. Many also need proper freezing space (walk-in type), shelving, computers and vehicles. The lack of adequate freezing capacity is a major problem. If at Christmas time or example, food banks receive turkey donations, they sometimes have to decline the offer. Certain food banks have overcome this problem through special arrangements made with local companies. The *Vestiaire Saint-Joseph* for example has succeeded in freezing as many as 500 one-pound bags of meat in this way.

As citizens, we should be re-examining our habit of sending expired "Best Before Date" products, swollen dented cans and undesirable food products to food banks. This re-examination should be done by food chains, non profit organizations as well as individual citizens. Before donating, we should ask "Would I be willing to eat this food?"

Input by CFSJ members into the N.B. survey of food banks

The N.B. Department of Social Development has initiated a survey on food banks and soup kitchens. The questionnaire designed to collect the information is presented in Figure 2.

⁸ Personal communication with a long-time volunteer at the "Open Hands Food Bank" in Moncton

Questions for participants*

1. What do you like and dislike about food banks and food bank practices?
2. Is the food you receive of good quality?
3. Are the opening hours sufficient to meet your needs?
4. What are your recommendations for improving food bank practices?
5. Do you go to a soup kitchen? If so which one? How are you treated at the soup kitchen?
6. Do you receive enough food when you eat at the soup kitchen? Is there variety and good quality in the food you receive?
7. If there was one thing you could change about the soup kitchen, what would that be?

* It is important to ask how much food they receive when they visit the food bank and what is included.

Figure 2. Questionnaire designed for the N.B. Food Survey

Given that several CFSJ members have been in contact with approximately 10 food banks, they possess valuable information which they are willing to share. This will be presented here, in response to the questions asked, and in the order they appear on the questionnaire.

Question 1. What do you like and dislike about food banks and their practices?

Some food banks receive more donations than others from private sources. The well-supported food banks use their money to purchase fresh eggs, fresh hamburger meat, etc. The quality of their hand-outs is good and appreciated by the clients. Other less "well-off" food banks disappoint their needy clients.

Food banks volunteers differ in their attitude toward their clients. Some show a great deal of compassion toward poor people. One example of this is the food bank manager who showed remarkable kindness toward a family unable to pay their electricity by offering them to take a much greater quantity of food so that they would not go hungry while investing their limited resources to pay the overdue the NB Power bills. Many other food bank volunteers seem to be happy to offer assistance to their clients, especially when there are children accompanying the adults. In general, they go beyond their regular assignments to help the clients. For example, volunteers working in a specific food bank utilized the extra bananas they had to bake banana breads or muffins which they distributed on the following day. To allocate the food equitably according to household's requirements, food bank clients are generally interviewed to evaluate their financial situation and their needs. Several food banks have computerized this information and can easily access the files of all their clients.

Some of the incorporated food banks have a "charity number". This gives them an advantage over others food banks. Their supporters can have a receipt for income tax

purposes so they tend to be more generous. Such food banks can afford better insurance coverage, may be able to ensure better hygiene practices, may possibly be capable of hiring people to train their staff and may also have a better administrative structure. This might also be reflected in the larger amount and better quality of the food offered.

Theoretically, food bank users should be receiving three days' worth of food to meet the household's nutritional needs. In many instances, this does not happen since what is handed out is quite limited. In certain settings, clients are allowed to browse along counters which display food and/or household items they can pick up. In other places, this is not allowed so it becomes embarrassing for them to negotiate at a distance for items they could really use. Their sense of dignity is sometimes hurt during the process.

Question 2. Is the food you receive of good quality?

As can be expected, some food bank users have expressed dislikes with regards to the quality of the food they receive from food banks. Several of these are enumerated below:

- ***Quality of the food.*** Food banks can only hand out the food they receive from donors. Consequently, it is not rare to find donated food which is of inferior quality. The pictures below illustrate dented cans and wilted or mouldy vegetables handed out by a food bank. The items frequently handed out include crackers which have past their "Best by..." date (in some cases by up to one year), pastas, and partially wilted vegetables. Such items are not nutritionally dense foods. This leaves the perception among food bank users that they are prone to nutritional deficiencies.



Dented canned handed out



Sprouted potatoes and mouldy carrot handed out.

A legislation was passed in 1992 to prevent food banks or food kitchens from becoming liable for negative incidents occurring as a result of donated food: "*Directors, of a non-profit organization that makes a charitable donation of food or items relating to personal hygiene to persons in the province is not liable for damages arising as a result of an act or omission of the Director, officers, agents or volunteer of a non-profit organization that constitutes gross negligence with respect to the health or safety of other persons*"⁹. Even if Directors are protected against being sued for handing out food that may cause harm, common sense does invite them to be cautious in this regard. Out of respect for their clients, food bank managers and volunteers should sort out the food they receive and discard that which is wilted and rotten. Some food banks do not hand out food that has passed the "Best by" date. **Their example should be followed by other food banks.**

⁹ N. B. Government. Charitable Donation of Food Act (www.gnb.ca/0062/acts/acts/c-02-002.htm)

- ***Lack of variety.*** Macaroni and cheese, baked beans and dry cereals which have past their expected shelf-life are frequently among the items that stack food bank shelves. Wieners, high in fat and in salt, are one type of meat product which is frequently distributed. Fresh meat, fruit and vegetables and milk are less frequently handed out. During the harvest season, some food banks are donated large quantities of strawberries, tomatoes, green beans, etc. Food bank clients may not be able to store these donated fresh foods. If offered 5 kg of tomatoes, a client may not be able to eat this in two days!
- ***Distribution of unfamiliar foods.*** Offering unfamiliar foods to food bank clients may lead to wastage as they might simply discard what they do not know how to prepare. To counteract this, the *Vestiaire Saint-Joseph* food bank from Shediac decided to include recipes with unfamiliar donated foods such as lentils.
- ***Sanitation standards.*** Many food banks have rules for hygiene and food security. However, there are some who are weak in this respect. For example, foods such as wieners are handled with bare hands instead of with gloves. Many food bank and food kitchen staff and volunteers do not wear hair nets. The province should enforce the same strict rules required of commercial food service establishments.
- ***Courtesy of volunteers toward clients.*** In spite of the good will of many food bank managers, some volunteers occasionally treat the clients in a rude manner.
- ***Allegations of food bank staff taking donated food home.*** In the past, there have been instances where food bank personnel have taken food home instead of serving it to the clients of the food banks for whom it was intended.

Question 3. Are the opening hours sufficient to meet the needs?

Food bank opening hours are generally limited to the latter part of the month and to week-day. Some food banks are opened on mornings only while others are only opened during the afternoon. Many food banks never open before the middle of the month. They often have a schedule going from 9 a.m. (or 10 a.m.) until noon or from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m.

Many of the food bank clients rely on a friend or a neighbour to drive them to a food bank. If the driver has to work during the food bank hours, this causes a problem. For that reason, food banks should consider adding more open hours, including some during the evening.

Another factor preventing the access of poor people to food banks is that of transportation. It would be very helpful if food bank managers or volunteers examined the possibility of organizing a transportation service for those who really need it.

Observations made at a local soup kitchen¹⁰

Questions 5, 6 and 7 of the N. B. government's survey focuses on soup kitchens. These are: (5) Do you go to a soup kitchen? If so which one? How are you treated at the soup kitchen?

¹⁰ Karing Kitchen, 75 Alma Street, Moncton

(6) Do you receive enough food when you eat at the soup kitchen? Is there variety and good quality in the food you receive? (7) If there was one thing you could change about the soup kitchen, what would that be?

In response to this government initiative, some CFSJ members of the Southeast Chapter recorded the comments of approximately 30 regular Karing Kitchen clients during the month of February 2010. The complaints received were regrouped in four categories. Table 1 summarizes the complaints received from these regular clients of Karing Kitchen.

Table 1. Summary of some complaints voiced by the clients of a soup kitchen

| Type of complaint or observation | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| <i>1. Related to food quality</i> | |
| • Serving spoiled food ¹¹ | 15 |
| • Using excessive amounts of salt in the food ¹² | 20 |
| • Lack of hygiene - cooks having a smoke, and right after, touching the food without washing their hands (no gloves worn) | 8 |
| • Handing out canned food to clients to take home but, when opened, more than half of these cans are of unacceptable quality | 10 |
| • Serving food that has rendered clients sick | 4 |
| <i>2. Related to a lack of respect/courtesy toward clients</i> | |
| • Refusing a glass of water to an elderly person to take medication | 1 |
| • Refusing water to people arriving at the soup kitchen and feeling thirsty ¹³ | 10 |
| • Telling the volunteer staff to disregard requests related to food allergies | 2 |
| • Asking rudely that clients wait outside for their drive during the winter | 2 |
| • Volunteer staff pushing a client rudely to the point of causing pain | 1 |
| <i>3. Related to the use of the soup kitchen telephone¹⁴</i> | |
| • Denying clients permission to make a phone call for a ride home | 2 |
| • Demanding clients to ask permission for the phone and saying "No" afterwards | 2 |
| <i>4. Different rules for the volunteer staff compared to the clients</i> | |
| • Volunteer staff taking donated food for themselves and not offering it to clients | 1 |
| • Volunteers taking many donated toys but restricting clients to one toy only | 1 |

¹¹ On one occasion, practically all of the clients of the day left the soup behind because it had a spoiled flavour.

¹² Approximately 25 clients of the soup kitchen suffer from hypertension; many of them have requested on several occasions that the cook lower the amount of salt used in soups, vegetables and on meats.

¹³ The refusal of drinking water occurs more frequently during the hot season.

¹⁴ Certain clients are given permission to use the soup kitchen telephone but not others - the latter feel discriminated against.

The volunteer staff working at Karing Kitchen are generally perceived as being courteous and respectful toward the clients. However, several behavioural and interrelationship problems arise regularly which are attributable to a couple of staff members or volunteers. The following is a list of complaints or incidents which are related to such lacks of courtesy and respect. They include:

- Passing judgements on clients
- Showing prejudice toward clients
- Acting in a disrespectful manner toward clients
- Laughing at clients and passing remarks on them
- Screaming at clients
- Treating people differently, based on the way they dress.

Conclusion

Food insecurity is primarily due to a lack of money. Food banks were created in the 1980s to reduce the number of people who were at risk of being hungry. But without social justice measures such as a guaranteed adequate income or a living wage to ensure food security, the multiplication of food banks will continue to offer individualistic solutions to a social problem, and this, in spite of all the good intentions of food bank managers and their committed volunteers.

Currently, approximately 18,000 New Brunswick families use food banks. The main users are social assistance recipients, low-income workers, people on disability pensions and seniors. The Common Front for Social Justice is quite concerned by the rising number of needy people experiencing food insecurity. The level of resources made available to food banks is insufficient to meet the increases in demand.

Food bank Board members and volunteers are reluctant to denounce the main cause of food insecurity, namely the huge income gap between the richest 10% of the population, compared to those situated at the bottom 10% of the scale. The lobby of food bank personnel would be very effective in bringing about change. If their views were expressed publicly, they would become a powerful force to bring about improved social policies and increased social assistance rates. They see, day in and day out, thousands of people who are forced to use food banks or soup kitchens to survive. They are aware of the frequent lack of nutritional quality of the foods they hand out and they regret this. They know that the amount of food handed out is not enough. CFSJ members fully recognize that food banks can only offer what they obtain through donations and government grants.

Given the close connections that CFSJ members have with food banks, they wanted to present their observations to the organizers of the N.B. survey. The main ones are:

- The majority of food bank volunteers are appreciated by food bank clients
- The quality of the food handed out by food banks varies from very good to very poor

- The variety of food items offered is limited and, given the emphasis the media places on the Canadian Food Guide and on good nutrition, food bank clients feel, rightfully or wrongly, that they are malnourished
- If food bank opening hours were expanded, this might accommodate more people

Part of the government survey focussed on soup kitchens. The Southeast Chapter of the CFSJ gathered input from 30 Karing Kitchen users in Moncton. Their comments were related to: (1) food quality; (2) lack of respect/courtesy toward clients; (3) kitchen phone use being forbidden; (4) varying rules applied to staff/volunteers and soup kitchen clients.

The CFSJ believes that the "food bank" approach will not solve the problems of poverty. Without more social justice, namely without a guaranteed adequate and dignified level of material resources to allow every citizen the stability and security to participate fully in society, the types of programs aimed at improving the food problems of the poor will only reinforce individualistic solutions to structural problems, no matter what the good intentions of the programmers may be.

List of recommendations

Members of CFSJ have drafted a series of recommendations which they respectfully submit to the Department of Social Development and other Department which have responsibilities toward funding, sanitation enforcement, etc. If considered and implemented, these recommendations would significantly improve the lives of people using food banks and soup kitchens.

1. Increase social welfare rates so that the people can afford to purchase food that is nutritious and which corresponds to their food habit pattern.
2. Provide a more generous and a more stable funding to food banks and soup kitchens for the period of time that the poverty level remains high in N. B.
3. Increase the proportion of qualified paid staff in food banks and soup kitchens.
4. Re-examine the administrative structure of food bank and soup kitchen's Boards of Directors and ensure that there are representatives of food bank users and of soup kitchen users on their respective Boards of Directors.
5. Ensure that a mechanism is in place for clients to channel their suggestions for improvements as well as their complaints.
6. Request that food bank directors ensure that their staff and volunteers discard the donated food which has started to spoil or which is way past its "Best by" date.
7. Request that each food bank and soup kitchen personnel follow all provincial health regulations and policies. They should have to follow the quality control procedures and good hygienic practices mandatory in all food service establishments.
8. Recommend that food banks and soup kitchens offer a greater variety of nutritious food and avoid serving stale food. In the long run, this will pay off as it will improve the health status of people living in poverty and reduce provincial health care costs.

9. Supply all food banks and soup kitchens in N.B. with up-to-date and approved food policies and regulations and ensure a province-wide distribution of this information.
10. Oversee that all the food bank and soup kitchen staff and volunteers receive training in how to deal with clients in a respectful and non-discriminatory manner. Policies in this matter should be formulated by the Board of Directors and their implementation should be monitored closely.
11. In Southeast N.B., request that an inventory be made of the food being delivered by *Food Dépot Alimentaire Inc.* to the respective local food banks or soup kitchens. Upon arrival at the delivery site, a list should be made of all the foods received.
12. Organize training sessions to increase the ability of food clients to (a) prepare a wider variety of foods; (b) learn to read nutrition labels; (c) learn about simple new recipes.
13. Expand the opening hours to better accommodate food bank users.
14. Organize a way of offering bus tickets or some alternate modes of transportation to clients who cannot walk to get their food, either at food banks or at soup kitchens.
15. Request that the N.B. government, in collaboration with municipalities, organize a community garden pilot project in one region. Through this activity, people on low income could harvest their own fresh vegetables for part of the year.
16. Urge the N.B. government to rescind the tax modifications made at the time of publication of the 2009 Provincial budget. This would allow a fairer wealth redistribution, thus making financial poverty reduction measures possible.