

Hunger in North Hastings

By Sarah Vance

We all need to eat, but food insecurities continue to be a concern within the Town of Bancroft ? a concern heightened during the winter months.

For many it begins with a hydro bill that increases from \$120 to \$250 in January. Then an empty furnace tank sets you back \$800 in February. If you need wood, a load of lumber is delivered, which takes a day to stack, and sets you back \$300. Later a plow digs out your snow covered driveway, which is worth the 40 bucks ? but this can happen twice a week in a ?normal? January.

Then there's the cost of housing. If you're not fortunate enough to own your own home (and pay your mortgage and taxes), your rent will cost 50 per cent of the average Bancroft family's monthly income.

For many families these expenses necessitate decision making between basic essentials such as heat, hydro or food.

The Hastings and Prince Edward Health Unit estimates that it takes \$191.33 each week to feed a family of four. And while this cost has increased by 14 per cent over the last five years, the average wage has not kept pace.

There are larger systemic problems that make these costs an issue in North Hastings. Bancroft's residents struggle with one of the lowest earning levels in the province. In 2011, the average household income was approximately \$35,000.

Coincidentally, the North Hastings Community Cupboard distributes 35,000 pounds of food each year in Bancroft. During the winter, the clientele visiting the Madawaska Street outlet goes up 30 per cent.

At one time the name ?Madawaska? was synonymous with a mining corporation that distributed more than \$1 million in wages each month to workers in the Bancroft area.

But this is no longer the case. It is now an aging population that provides employment in Bancroft. The regional profile for Hastings County gives the Hastings Centennial Manor as Bancroft's largest employer in 2011.

This aging population itself is also not immune to food insecurity, in fact, 65 per cent of clients at the North Hastings Community Cupboard are aged 65 years or older.

These factors combine to give Hastings and Prince Edward Counties the second highest rate of food insecurity in Ontario. In all, one in nine households, and more than 17,600 residents, are at the margin when it comes to having enough food.

Grassroots organizations work to help at the local level. Harvest the North, a community garden project, recently addressed their intent to install 10 additional vegetable beds at Riverside and Millennium Park next summer.

Schools in North Hastings deliver hot meals through local breakfast clubs and Harvest the North looks to involve youth in their future projects.

On Bridge Street, the North Hastings Community Trust offers effective one-time funding to families in need of financial support when they face an emergency.

More than 30 volunteers provide food from the North Hastings Community Cupboard, on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons. And a growing network of homesteaders, many driven by a desire to put food production back into the hands of the people, are busy trying to carve farming enterprises out of the Canadian Shield wilderness.

But questions remain.

Are local municipal councils truly leveraging their capacity to support the work of these peripheral community agencies as they strive to obtain their goals?

If this is in fact happening, what funding opportunities exist at provincial and federal levels to enhance existing models?

And if they exist, are the resources provided enough?

As those experiencing food insecurities are only too aware, a box of food only goes so far ? and that is usually not far enough.

As a community we must develop holistic programs that address the underlying causes of food insecurity, rather than tackling food insecurity as an isolated issue.

To achieve this, Bancroft requires more developed networks of support, which will work across the board of social issues, including adequate and affordable housing, as well as a consolidated strategy for reducing the shrapnel associated with mental illness, addiction and unemployment.