

Halton's Local Fresh Food

by Trudi Down

PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS

At 7:30 a.m. the delivery trucks start arriving. By 8:30 the volunteer packers start to arrive. By 9:30 loose food items like mushrooms and bananas have been weighed and bagged or bundled. At 10:00 the first of 290 green recyclable plastic boxes makes its way down a long conveyor belt.

Volunteers sort fresh produce at Georgetown Christian Fellowship Church.

It's a snowy March Tuesday and St. Christopher's Anglican Church in Burlington is the site of the monthly sorting and packing of food boxes for the Halton Fresh Food Box program. Now entering its fourth year, the non-profit program provides a box of fruits and vegetables once a month to anyone who subscribes. The majority of subscribers are seniors and people in financial need. A number, however, are people who want to support local farmers and eat locally grown produce.

The group of more than 20 helpers is well organized. Working in pairs along both sides of the conveyor, they select bags of carrots or bunches of celery from the tables behind them and place the items in the boxes sliding past. A sign posted at each of the 15 food stations tells them how much is to be placed into the boxes. To each box will also be added a newsletter with announcements, recipes and tips on food storage.

Program coordinator Brenda Moher explains that the program arose out of a steering committee formed in 2000 by members of the

community who were concerned with the issue of poverty in Halton Region. "There was a real desire to do something immediate and effective for the vulnerable in our community," she says. "Poverty in Halton is hidden."

There may not be individuals begging for handouts at street corners, but the region is home to many single parents, young adults living on government assistance, seniors with meager pensions and unemployed new Canadians, all of whom struggle every month to make ends meet financially.

Statistics Canada for 2000/01 reports that 8.25 per cent or about 32,000 of Halton residents lack the finances to make healthy food purchases, or to buy enough food for themselves and their families. The survey notes that between 23 and 45 per cent of children live in poverty in Halton Region, depending on the geographic location.

The Fresh Food Box program is the only one of its size and focus in the area, Moher adds, and is based on Toronto's successful Good Food Box Program, now in its 15th year.

Moher, a registered dietician, has 20 years of experience in the public health sector. Working about 21 hours a week from an office at St. Christopher's, she is responsible for ordering and ensuring delivery of the produce, organizing

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volunteers, obtaining subscriber evaluations and feedback, writing the newsletter and managing the finances.

The idea is simple: provide a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables once a month for a reasonable cost. Buy the food locally and in bulk, to help keep costs down. Buy from local farmers, whenever possible. A small box costs \$15, the larger one, \$20. Brenda says the amounts represent \$20 and \$25 worth of food, respectively.

The program encourages people to eat more healthily, reaches out to vulnerable-income people, provides a market for local farmers and helps build a stronger community. There are no criteria for participating; no one is asked any questions and anyone from Halton Region can subscribe. Currently, about 500 people purchase the monthly box, far too many for one location to handle. Consequently, 250 of the boxes are filled at the Georgetown Christian Fellowship Church for distribution to subscribers there and in Acton and Milton.

It's amazing what can still be obtained locally in March! The sorting tables include locally grown carrots, onions, apples, potatoes and mushrooms. Cauliflower, oranges, limes, plums and cabbages are among the other items included in today's boxes.

It's a bit of a balancing act, Brenda acknowledges. "We really try to provide fresh food for people, but

they have limited incomes and the box prices are fixed. Supply can be a problem, too. This year, for example, local pears were done by December." What she can't buy locally, she will obtain from elsewhere in Ontario, from other parts of Canada and, lastly, from offshore distributors.

By 10:30, 100 small boxes sit at the far end of the conveyor, filled and topped with a lid. By noon, all the day's boxes are packed and loaded on trucks for delivery to one of the 12 pickup sites around Burlington and Oakville. The Georgetown location delivers to another 10 sites. Pickup locations include senior centres, food banks, several churches and area schools. Every pickup location has a site coordinator who manages the process of ordering, payment and delivery of the boxes at the site.

"The volunteers are what keep the program going," Brenda says. "We really couldn't do it without them."

Approximately 120 men and women, young and retired, pitch in every month to help with sorting and packing, delivery, lunch preparation, even knocking down the produce boxes for recycling. Some are the very people who benefit from the program, including new Canadians grateful for help with their food bills and wanting to give back to the community.

The boxes pay for themselves. Funding to administer the program is received from Halton Region, and from St. Christopher's which provides office space and equipment, including a phone. Additional support is received from Choices 4 Health and from the Burlington Community Foundation. A volunteer steering committee provides overall direction and planning for the program.

Anyone interested in buying a box or having a drop site in their neighbourhood should contact Brenda Moher at 905 634 8645. ■

Trudi Down provides writing, editing, research and proofreading skills for clients in business, arts, advertising and education, through www.thecorporateword.com.