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Workers at the North York Harvest Food Bank.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A tradition of helping their neighbours in need

BY SEAN DELANEY

The North York Harvest Food Bank has been open since 1985. Although 35 years ago, it began as a small non-profit started by a small group of volunteers intent on just getting food to their neighbours.

“It was about just helping out those who need help,” said Henry Chiu, Director of Development and Marketing for the food bank. “It was never meant to be long term, but here we are.”

Today, North York is part of a network of 40 agencies across the northern part of Toronto. However, Chiu explained they continue to operate with their independent staff. In normal times, it allows them to be on the ground with their hands on the operation. Now, during the coronavirus pandemic and closures, it has allowed them to continue operating as they've supplemented lost volunteer work with staff.

“Unbeknownst to us at the time, we were built for a situation like today,” Chiu said.

Last year the food bank served

24,000 unique individuals.

About one-third of those came for the first time.

“We had a nine percent increase from the previous year. People are migrating from the downtown core to the suburbs because of the high cost of living.”

And Chiu said, for those considering helping, they should know who they are helping. He said the mental picture of who a food bank user is doesn't match reality for most people.

“A third of our clients are kids. Out of our 40 agencies, one of the busiest is located on the campus of York University, so the notion that, hey, you work harder won't need the food bank is wrong. Fifty percent of our clients have some form of post-secondary. A person's situation dictates the use, and it's not that people are lazy or not intelligent.”

When the pandemic began, half of

their network was closed.

“Some of our agencies are very small, operating out of the basement of a church, or something. At that point, safety was considered most important. So only the front line and program staff continue to work. We've halted volunteer support, which means some of the volunteer work, which we

rely on heavily, we had to use relief staff to fill functions. People like myself, in the back offices, are working from home. And our operational teams are doing split shifts, and have adjusted operations to ensure food continues to get to those in need.”

They are now pre-packing all their food hampers and packing a little more food, so families don't have to leave the house as often.

A spring food drive was cancelled, but they have partnered with the Toronto Food Bank to open temporary locations in public libraries for food

pickups.

“As of two weeks ago, we opened eight more. It has been a great partnership.”

If you're looking to help the cause, Chiu said consider cash donations.

While they accept all food and security donations, and the community has been generous with them, they don't have the typical volunteer force to sort and pack food and cash means they can shop for specific needs.

And because it's done online, it's the quickest way to support the bank.

The North York Harvest Food Bank is located at, 116 Industry Street, Toronto.

Call them at: 416-635-7771

Email them at:

info@northyorkharvest.com

Find them online at:

www.northyorkharvest.com

The top five items of need:

Cooking oil

Canned fish/protein

Canned tomatoes

Beans and lentils

Pasta/rice/grain products.

