

Local food bank sees rising demand

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Shelburne's food bank, Shepherd's Cupboard, along with others across the province are facing an increased demand, with staff there reporting a 40 per cent increase in the number of families they've seen since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ardith Dunlop, volunteer coordinator at Shepherd's Cupboard, in an interview with the Free Press said that since the start of the pandemic the Shelburne food bank has seen an average of 125 to 150 families using their services each month, while it saw only 70 to 80 families pre-COVID-19. Currently, 279 families are listed as using the food bank.

"This certainly does speak to a dramatic rise in the numbers," said Dunlop, adding that the food bank has seen a large influx in the number of first time users.

The influx in first time users is not just a sentiment seen by the local food bank. Feed Ontario released a new report on Monday (Nov. 30), which found a 26.5 percent increase of first time users in the first four months of COVID-19. Data for the report was collected from 130 direct member food banks and 1,100 affiliates.

While food insecurity is one of the main focuses of the food bank, Dunlop and the document from Feed Ontario both note that users of food banks are also facing other insecurities including housing. According to Feed Ontario, the primary driver for the growth of food bank use has been, "inadequate social safety net, precarious employment, and unaffordable housing."

"The primary reason that an adult or family may need to access a food bank is that they do not have sufficient income to afford all of their necessities, like rent, heat, hydro, transportation, and food, in a given month," details the report.

Dunlop said that she has had five clients who were facing eviction at the end of November.

"I see a lot of increase in the worry and the stress that they're facing in the world, over food, over will they be able to make ends meet, will they be able to keep themselves safe and their kids safe? you hear all those concerns when you're there."

The holiday season is now in full swing and the food bank is entering what Shepherd's Cupboard calls their "fatter time" of the year, where they receive donations that help support them from January to June.

With increasing demand for food security, Feed Ontario in its report said it believes that "the worst is yet to come." Dunlop said they expect to be looking at the fall out of COVID-19 for the next two years.

"While we have enough food to finish the year, who knows how long into the new year we can continue at this pace," she noted.