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DC Federal Liberal joins ?Put Food in the Budget? challenge

The Headwaters Food & Farming Alliance (HFFA) is participating in the ?Put Food in the Budget? Campaign to increase the social assistance food allowance. Shelburne's former Mayor and newly nominated candidate for the Federal Liberal party will join the campaign by living off an emergency hamper from the Orangeville Food Bank for three days.The initial campaign began in January of 2009 as push back against stagnated social assistance rates with a demand that the Social Assistance Review Commission recommend payment levels that ?ensure a life of health and dignity.?

According to the campaign, initiatives in the last four years include the? Do the Math Survey? which has seen 10,000 people in the province calculate a required monthly minimum of $1500 for social assistance to ensure health and dignity. Twenty-eight municipalities endorsed the demand for an immediate $100/month increase to social assistance, and one thousand people in 26 communities have lived on a ?food bank diet? for one week.

From April 29th to May 5th, Dufferin County community members will participate in the ?Do the Math? Challenge by visiting the Orangeville Food Bank and living off an emergency food hamper for three days to raise awareness about food access. To date, the group is composed of Ed Crewson Federal Liberal Candidate, Jeremy Williams Orangeville Mayor, Heather Hayes of Dufferin Child and Family Services and Deputy Mayor of Mulmur, Steve Murphy Dufferin Emergency Management, Juli Griffin of Dufferin County Community Services, Bill Tremblay writer for the Orangeville Banner, Jeff Sedgwick from Headwaters Communities In Action, Rita Sethi Director of Community Health and Wellness for Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, Bethany Lee from the Town of Caledon Communications Department, Wayne Kalinski the Orangeville Police Chief, and Elaine Capes past Deputy Mayor for Mono.

The participants will share their experience on a blog hosted by Headwaters Communities in Action (HCIA) at www.headwaterscommunities.org, and at a Town Hall event at the Lord Dufferin Centre in Orangeville at 6:30? 8:30 pm on May 5th. The challenge will also provide participants and audience members with an awareness of how food insecurity may ?impact an individual's ability to lead a healthy and dignified life.? HCIA invites everyone to come and be part of the May 5th conversation, which will be moderated by Mike Balkwill, Provincial Coordinator for ?Put Food in the Budget.?

Kathryn MacDonald HFFA ?Do the Math? Challenge Lead, says, ?As a dietitian she has spent time communicating messages about the importance of healthy food choices and supporting people in healthy behaviour change. ?At the same time I've had the chance to get to know and work with community members who face the challenges and difficult choices living on a limited income presents. Volunteering at the Orangeville Food Bank has given me the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of individual struggles with food access issues and the need to work towards solutions that help preserve dignity and health. Getting involved with HFFA-Education, Literacy and Access group has allowed me to work on projects such as the ?Do The Math? Challenge to help raise awareness through experience of the importance of access to adequate healthy food choices for all, all of the time.?

According to HFFA, approximately 7.5% of households in the Headwaters Region are food insecure. ?The experience of being food insecure can range from anxiety about running out of food, to reduced food intake, to not having enough to eat,? says Kathryn MacDonald. ?Current social assistance rates do not reflect the cost of living in our community and put people in jeopardy by making them choose between housing, food and other basic necessities of life.?

From the HCIA view, Shirley Boxem Lead Project Consultant says, ?The most under addressed area of our food system is the people who have confined access to any food, and therefore their food choices are guided by cost, not by health benefits. Food security and a healthy food system should include everyone, and I think Kathryn's initiative will highlight the fact that many are currently left out. Hopefully, our Town Hall event will get leaders to the table to start the conversation on solutions.?

Federal Liberal Candidate Ed Crewson said he was ?humbled? by the opportunity to ?better understand the needs of the less fortunate? in Dufferin-Caledon. ?It is important that I experience the circumstances that people who depend on the food bank, experience every day because there are far too many people in our community who are hungry.? Crewson believes strategies that bring ?improvements in training opportunities as well as counselling and mental health services and access to affordable housing would hopefully help?these programs prevent people from falling into the poverty spiral, but more affordable housing is an area where the Federal Government has been steadily retreating and we need to reverse that and start supporting our municipal partners again. I hope this experience will enable me to assist and serve the most vulnerable among us.?

Deputy Mayor of Mulmur Heather Hayes sees issues first hand in her work as a Dufferin Child and Family Service Coordinator, ?I believe most residents do not have an understanding, including myself, of what it's like to survive on a package from the food bank,? says Hayes. ?I have heard from my clients things like they have stopped going to the food bank and do without because they simply can't get out to the food bank and carry the items back home again as most are canned items. For people with mobility or health

problems it's too hard. Teaching people cooking skills in years past, I believe there is a big disconnect between what is available to them at the food bank vs what they have the skills to make out of the supplies. We expect the most resourcefulness from people who typically have the least resources. I'm referring to who can make canned beans into a meal a family will eat without a pantry of spices and condiments to make them taste good, the implements to prepare them (from knives, to frying pans to casserole dishes to freezers to store extras) and the skills to make them into meals. Within my circle of friends, coworkers and family, few people have the skills to do what we ask of clients of the food bank to do monthly. This will be an opportunity to get a better understanding of both the emotional and physical toll of using this vital community service and perhaps shed light on what could be done to build skills and understanding.?

HFFA encourages Dufferin residents to check out the ?Put Food in the Budget? website and join the Town Hall event to hear about the challenges participants faced and be part of a solution. ?Public action can make a difference to raise awareness that charity is not enough and policy change and social investment are required.?

By Marni Walsh