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Food equity in Dufferin a growing concern

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The Headwaters Food and Farming Alliance (HFFA,) a project of Headwaters Communities in Action (HCIA,) ?envisions a food system that is productive, sustainable, transparent, and fair; supports the health and wellbeing of all residents;? and values ?everyone's basic right to afford and physically access healthy food.?

This month, HFFA made it known that ?Food insecurity is a serious public health issue? in our area. According to the latest Nutritious Food Basket report from Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health, issued for 2018, the newletter stated, ?14 percent of households in our region are food insecure, meaning families cannot afford to put healthy food on the table.?

According to their statistics, ?The average cost of purchasing healthy food in WDG is $210.09 per week for a reference family of four. This is slightly higher than the Ontario average of 12 percent. ?

HFFA points out that a ?lack of access to food and key nutrients leaves both adults and children vulnerable to a variety of physical, mental and social health issues including chronic diseases, social exclusion and depression.? The organization warns, ?These consequences carry even bigger costs.?

Jennifer Payne of HFFA calls the statistics ?startling.? She says, ?As an agricultural region it's easy to think that fresh food is plentiful and easily accessed. But a lack of food access isn't a supply and demand issue, it is a poverty issue. Eating healthy is simply out of reach for some families, as illustrated in the report from Public Health.?

Ms. Payne says, ?It's tough to reconcile the environmental issue of food waste with the issue of food access, and the conundrum of the high cost of healthcare, mainly diet-related diseases, versus the cost of healthy food. But there are lots of people working hard on problems like these. As I recently heard Heather Hayes of the Orangeville Food Bank put it, ?there is no food waste. It's just food.?

As the Executive Director of Orangeville Food Bank, Heather Hayes told the Free Press, ?We have seen an increase in the amount of people accessing emergency food support from the Food Banks within the County, including Orangeville Food Bank, Shelburne's Shepherd's Cupboard and Grand Valley's Concern. In Orangeville alone, we have seen a 91% increase in unique individuals accessing our services since 2011 - with our largest increase seen in seniors.?

Ms. Hayes says, ?With the growing need we are working toward increasing the access to our services with a senior's pop up market, Saturday openings, and supplying healthy, fresh take out meals from West Side Secondary to local community agencies for individuals who can not access services. With a focus on providing fresh and perishable foods we continue to come together with community partners to find innovative ways to increase access to nutritious food across the county.?

HFFA points out that ?one thing people can do is to get educated.? Jennifer Payne suggests participating in the food drives and donate toonies for breakfast programs. She says, ?It's also eye-opening to get a look at how the systems work, and follow the research and join the work on the root causes of why some people can't afford to eat healthy. Support programs in the ways they need support, lend skills, resources and energy to the solutions, and support petitions and organizations working on things like a national school food program and food policy at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.?

Jennifer Payne says she sees hope in the creative programs and collaborative efforts of the local food banks and other community food-based organizations, as well as the growing movements for national food policy and student nutrition programs, and the work of poverty reduction councils.?When you think about the fact that more than one in ten households in Dufferin County are food insecure,? she says, ?odds are that we all know someone going hungry or undernourished.?