

Confronting Food Insecurity at the Local Level

The Case of Parker Street Food & Furniture Bank

Introduction

Background Info about Parker Street

- How it started
- How it expanded

Parker Street's Core Services

- Food Bank Services
- Furniture Bank Services
- Thrift stores
- Emergency Fund Program

Parker Street's Annual Programs & Services

- Back to School Program
- Christmas in July
- Autumn Coat Drive
- Christmas Hamper Program

Parker Street & Food Security in the HRM

- What we are doing to address food insecurity
- Our urgent need for delivery and warehouse volunteers

How donations from ECIDS will benefit the community

- New Truck Fund update

Closing Remarks

Introduction

Good morning, everyone! It is a great honour to be with you this morning to speak about Parker Street Food & Furniture Bank and the work we're doing in the Halifax region to address food insecurity and the ways through which our impact in the community has been felt across the region. I'm truly beyond excited about this opportunity.

Before I begin my presentation, I would like to give a HUGE shoutout to the organizers of this very timely and important conference, for all the hard work they have put to ensure that this year's ECIDS goes well and smoothly.

I also would like to wholeheartedly thank them for graciously selecting our organization to support this year. We are absolutely grateful to you for this support and look forward to letting you know how your support will enable us continue serving the most marginalized in the HRM.

I also would like to share some good news with you this morning. As of February 22nd, 2022, I officially became a Canadian citizen. I first came to Canada in 2016 and completed my post-graduate studies at the University of Waterloo, and let me tell you, the journey from being a student to being a citizen has been quite the journey. I couldn't have asked for a better way to celebrate being a Canadian citizen than by working with such a compassionate, community-based organization as Parker Street Food & Furniture Bank which has been on the frontlines serving the needs of the most disadvantaged in the HRM since 1983.

The title I chose for my presentation this morning is Confronting Food Insecurity at the Local Level – the Case of Parker Street Food & Furniture.

In my presentation, I will be providing you with an overview of the history of our organization, how we started and how we expanded our services. I'll also speak about the core services as well as our annual programs that we run here at Parker Street. Then, I will be speaking more about food security in Nova Scotia and HRM, and how it is such a serious issue which requires our collective efforts and immediate action. Then I will speak about the work we have been doing to confront food insecurity in our region, and finally I will talk about how the donations from ECIDS will help us which will in turn have a very positive impact on our community.

Parker Street – Early Beginnings

We first opened our doors in 1983 with a goal of providing food free of charge to the financially vulnerable in the Halifax region. It was in a response to a community need. Initially, our operations began in the basement of the Adventist Church on Parker Street, where the food bank gets its name. As our clients grew, we moved our operations into a single car garage at the same location. The organization started with one staff member and a few volunteers, and later moved to its current home on Maynard Street where the team has grown to include over 20 full-time and part-time staff and over 40 active volunteers.

In 1990, as a registered charity, we were incorporated as Community Care Network Society operating under the working names of Parker Street Food and Furniture Bank, Great Things in Store, and The Turkey Club. Since incorporation, our operations have expanded to include furniture, clothing and household items, meeting a wide range of needs in the community.

Now in its 39th year, Parker Street continues to help the less fortunate residents in the Halifax Regional Municipality. The current active client base consists primarily of low-income or fixed-income individuals and families based on their assessed needs. Of those receiving food from Parker Street, one-third are on social assistance, one-third are on provincial disability support, nine percent are on a pension, and around 40 percent are children. On average, about 1,200 families receive food, furniture, and clothing assistance each month.

Parker Street's Core Services (Food Bank)

As far as our core services are concerned, we operate a food bank, a furniture bank, two thrift stores and an emergency fund.

It goes without saying that our food bank services are the ones that are most needed and requested. Through our food bank services, we continue to be on the frontlines in the HRM feeding those who are hungry and doing our part in addressing food insecurity until more permanent and more sustainable solutions are found.

In 2021 alone, we had more than 13,000 food bank visits; and through our combined programs, we assisted well over 30,000 individuals across the HRM. In monetary value, the food we received and distributed in 2021 was worth over 2.5 million dollars.

On average, we distribute 60 food boxes to families across the HRM every week. The home delivery aspect of our Food Program is an integral part of ensuring that we can reach the most vulnerable in our community. Tuesdays are our delivery days.

All of our registered clients are eligible for one food box every three weeks. These boxes are pre-made every morning before service hours. If a client has a special diet or require specific items, we take note of that and items are provided if available when the client comes to pick up their food box.

Since the onset of Covid, we have asked that all of our clients book appointments to pick up their food boxes. This has helped us in planning, tracing, and cleaning, and by doing that we were able to do our part in stopping the spread of the virus.

It's also worth mentioning that in the past 2 years since Covid, we've definitely seen a larger increase in clients coming to us for help. I'd say 15 to 20% per year. The pandemic and the rising food cost have been the main factor. Rent is going up, groceries are going up, and lots of people have lost their jobs over the last couple of years. And there is not a lot of programs now to help supplement that, especially after the Covid support benefits have ended, like the CERB.

Moving forward, we will be placing more effort on continuing to expand where we source our food from. We're hoping we can do this by collaborating with more local partners and securing food grants from local, provincial and national foundations.

Parker Street's Core Services (Furniture Bank)

In addition to our food services, we also operate the only furniture bank in Nova Scotia, and one of the very few in Atlantic Canada! Our furniture department provides services to those needing help with furniture in our community. We receive requests for assistance almost on a daily. All of the donated furniture items we get are from either community members or community organizations. Before any furniture items get delivered to our clients, they go to the Parker Street workshop to get a polish before reaching their new home. The furniture aspect of our operations is specifically designed to help those looking for a fresh start and those who just can't afford to buy new furniture for themselves or their families.

Our furniture services include picking up donated items if those who are donating aren't able to drop them off for whatever reason. We also arrange delivery of donated items to those in need who cannot arrange pick-up for medical or financial reasons or for other pressing reasons. In 2021 alone, we delivered more than eighteen hundred furniture pieces to 291 families across the HRM.

Parker Street's Core Services (Thrift Stores)

In addition to our food and furniture bank, we also operate two thrift stores, one in Dartmouth (in the Woodlawn area) and the other one in Halifax (in the Spryfield area), and they are called Great Things In Store. The intention behind opening these two thrift store was to complement our food bank services in serving the needs of the lower income members of our community. These two thrift stores also serve as a revenue source for Parker Street, and cover a major portion of our operating and administrative expenses, which in turn helps us optimize the value of the monetary donations we receive.

These stores offer a wide range of donated goods. Items include clothing, antiques, small household appliances and furniture. Our objective is to offer a wide range of products in the moderate price range – good quality at prices people can afford. If you have items that our stores or our furniture department could use or if you know of a friend or a neighbor who may have items to donate, please reach out to us, and we will be absolutely happy to take them! There are many out there who need help.

Parker Street's Core Services (Emergency Fund)

We also operate an emergency fund to assist those facing unexpected financial crises across the HRM. The help comes in the form of monetary support that is paid on behalf of the applicant. We mainly help with outstanding power bills, oil for heating especially during the extremely cold winter months, and we also help with medical prescription, and more recently with rent supplements as a result of the pandemic and the increasing cost of shelter. The demand on our emergency fund is always high. In 2020, we helped around

100 families with emergency funds, but in 2021 this number increased to 273 families! The reason behind that is that in 2020 the covid support benefits were still available, but in 2021 the CERB and the CRB ended. So some might have fallen through the cracks when those benefits ended, and add to that the increasing cost of groceries and shelter have also been a contributing factor to the increase in families reaching out for help. This year, we are expecting to assist over 300 families this year if we have the needed funds.

We have lots of success stories of families being served through our Emergency Fund Program. One of them is a 26 year old single mom of 2 daughters. She told us that she and her daughters had been living at her parents and needed to own their house in a safe family friendly environment. As a single mother, it was hard for her to come up with rent money, damage deposit and also an outstanding power bill. She contacted Parker Street emergency fund to help with the outstanding NS Power bill which was \$2000. She was able to reach a settlement with the power company and had power connected at her new house. She said that Parker Street worked fast, and contacted NS Power on her behalf and made arrangements promptly.

Parker Street's Annual Programs & Services

In the next few slides, I will be reviewing briefly our 4 main annual programs & services through which we get to help hundreds of families throughout the HRM.

1. **Back to School Program:** Through this program we provide backpacks filled with school supplies to school age students as well as adults enrolled in ESL classes. 2021 has been our most successful year so far, as we were able to help 914 students across the HRM.
2. **Christmas in July:** Well, Christmas doesn't necessarily need to be in December so we also have another unique program that takes place every year in July, and that is Christmas in July. Last year, we were able to provide more than 200 individuals, including parents and children, with new toys, clothing and snacks.
3. **Autumn Coat Drive:** Through this program, we were able to help 170 families in our community by providing them with winter clothing items such as jackets, coats, hats, mitts, etc.
4. **Christmas Hamper Program:** The Christmas Hamper Program is our biggest annual program, and we have been hosting it for over 35 years, and let me tell you, A LOT goes into the planning and implementation of this program. If I were to cover all the aspects associated with this program, I'd probably need an entire session! It's just an amazing program, and each year, along with many volunteers, we help about hundreds of families in need have a more enjoyable Christmas. In 2021 and despite the Covid-19 challenges that we were facing at the time, 750 families had a Christmas dinner, and their children were given Christmas toys. And that was only possible because of the incredible generosity of the community! Each year, the Halifax Forum graciously donates their facility to us so we could do our program. Volunteers from the Bedford Institute of Oceanography donate their time to pack the hampers and deliver them to registered clients; the Halifax

Firefighters and Q104 (a local radio station) do the toy drive for us (in 2021, we received two trucks fully loaded with toys which we were able to share with the community). Other members of our community also donate their time to help during the distribution days. And this of course happens in direct coordination with our program's staff. This program really brings the community together with one simple goal, and that is giving joy and love to those in need in the community.

Food Insecurity in the HRM

Now, in the following section of my presentation, I will be sharing with you more about Food Insecurity in Nova Scotia and the HRM. I'm hoping that what I'm about to present will give you a little glimpse as to how serious this issue is, and it is my wish that this platform would be a catalyst for immediate action to address food insecurity in our region.

As we probably already know, poverty is the root cause of food insecurity and the root cause of food bank usage. Economic disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic, low incomes and government policies that do not provide adequate support keep the number of food bank users persistently and unacceptably high. At 4.6 per cent of households, Nova Scotia has the highest share of severe food insecurity in Canada. In 2021, Parker Street had more than 13,000 food bank visits in total visits. And if we look at more statistics, we will find that approximately 70% of people who use food banks in NS rent their dwellings. It is recommended that households spend no more than 30 per cent of their income on rent; however, in Nova Scotia the lowest income group is spending close to 70% per cent of their income on rent and utilities.

Worth mentioning here also is that current events that have impacted Canadian food security are the trucker's protest blocking our border crossings with the US. Inflation is high and food prices are high. And another issue we faced was the shortage of temporary foreign workers to pick our crops due to COVID travel restrictions. In the last two years, some wholesale supply outlets couldn't sell us a pallet of canned vegetables due to short supply.

There are plenty of factors affecting current food security here in Canada. These issues affect all of us but the impact on the people who fall within the category of low income is so much worse.

Demographics

Now if we look at some demographics, we will see that

Children: In Canada, one third of food bank clients are children. In Nova Scotia, the number is the same. In 2021, Parker Street supported 31,000 individuals, more than 30% of whom were also children and youth under the age of 18.

Households with children across the HRM have been more likely to experience food insecurity during the pandemic. That is mainly because of the economic impacts of the

pandemic, higher costs related to raising a family, along with unemployment and rising costs of living.

Seniors and Persons with Disabilities: According to Food Banks Canada, 57.5% of all households on social assistance and disability support in Nova Scotia are served by food banks. In the HRM, there is a continual increase in new food bank users in various population segments, such as seniors and those with disabilities.

Single persons: In Nova Scotia, the majority of food insecure households are working poor, and 48% of food bank users in Nova Scotia are single persons. That is why there is a need for increased supports targeted to single adults living with low incomes.

One of the common themes that we see among these previously mentioned categories is that they are overrepresented in food bank use compared to their percentage in the overall population.

Our Response to Food Insecurity in HRM

- In the following section, I'd like to share with you about our response to food insecurity in the HRM. I would like to emphasize again that we are a temporary response to food insecurity. Food security must be confronted with daring and bold social policy, and we will continue to advocate along with other like-minded organizations for these crucially important social policy changes. Research has shown that food insecurity can be reduced through public policies that improve the financial circumstances of low-income households.
- Since the onset of Covid-19, our number one priority for moving forward was to make sure that the food bank would remain open and operational. Our staff needed to be able to provide essential services and remain safe. Next, we began to stabilize our food resources and let our clients and donors know that we were continuing to serve.
- Some of the specific steps we took to ensure that we continued to serve and that people continued to receive the help they were in a desperate need for included the following:
 1. We started a call-in appointment system for clients as we stopped having people inside our facility.
 2. We increased the frequency clients are eligible for food boxes. So before Covid it was once every 3 weeks, during Covid it became once every two weeks, and now it's back to once every 3 weeks.
 3. We increased the number of food service days.
 4. We also increased the hours of our food service.
 5. And we also increased the home delivery of food boxes. And I'd like mention here that we are in a huge need for volunteers to help us deliver food to those who can't come to the food bank because of transportation and mobility challenges. If anyone is interested in volunteering or know someone who may be interested in volunteering, please let them contact Sonah Leahey, our Director of Client Services ASAP.

- Aside from Covid, we also do a lot in terms of repurposing and reclaiming food that would otherwise end up in waste. Parker Street receives about 80 percent of its food offerings from reclamation, including viable, unsold food from grocery stores and supermarkets – and the remaining 20 percent from food drives, individual donations and third-party events.

The Need for a New Refrigerated Truck

The increasing and absolutely legitimate needs of those who live across the HRM mean increasing requests for assistance which in turn create incredible opportunities for growth. These opportunities will benefit first and foremost the most vulnerable in our community, and I have every good reason to believe that they will have a positive impact on our community.

Our biggest need right now is to replace our 2005 3-tonne truck which has served us well over the past 15 years. This truck is officially dead after the latest news I heard from our maintenance manager about the brakes failing. We have been babying this truck for a long time, but after the latest issues we've had with it, there is absolutely no point in investing any more maintenance funds.

We have been working very hard to find alternative solutions until we get a new truck. We have been looking at leasing a used truck or using our small cube van.

As far as fundraising is concerned for the new refrigerated truck, we started our official fundraising campaign earlier in 2021. Our goal for 2021 was to raise \$100,000 out of the total confirmed cost which is \$176,000. The good news I'd like to share with you is that we successfully attained our first milestone, that is \$100,000 by the end of 2021. We are hoping we can raise the remainder of the funds by the end of May. We are still in need of another \$70,000.

A new refrigerated truck will mean that more food insecure families across the HRM will be served with healthy and fresh food items. Our capacity to accept frozen food donations such as frozen meats and fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables will be maximized. A new refrigerated truck will enable us to continue working with the community in our collective and ambitious goals to end hunger in the Halifax region. It will help us meet the needs of those who are struggling as a result of the combined impact of rising food prices, high housing costs and low incomes which together have created a perfect storm for so many families across our region.

This truck will be on the road 7 days week either picking up donated or purchased food items or delivering food and other much-needed household items to those who need help the most.

A new refrigerated truck is going to be a visible and tangible proof of our collective commitment to achieving food security in the Halifax region and our ambitious vision to end hunger in this part of our beloved country.

Closing remarks:

In closing, I would like kindly ask you to keep Parker Street and the work we are doing in your thoughts. Your support means so much, not only to organization but most importantly to the people who we serve. Let's continue to work together to turn this "perfect storm" into a "perfect opportunity" for the overall good of our community.

Everyone here is a stakeholder in our collective efforts to confront the root causes of food insecurity, and by supporting our organization, you join a movement of kind-hearted individuals who are passionate about the betterment of their community, a movement that is fuelled by the generosity of its wonderful donors and supporters who provide us with the capacity to carry on. Together we can absolutely make a very tangible difference.

Once again, thank you very much for having me today and for this lovely opportunity to share more about Parker Street Food & Furniture Bank, and the work we do in the Halifax region. It's been an honor.

If you have any questions, I will be more than happy to answer them. My contact information is as follows:

Address: 2415 Maynard Street, Halifax (if you're interested in meeting with me)

Phone: 902.377.4767 (if you're interested in calling me)

Email: amgad.zaky@parkerstreet.org (if you're interested in emailing me)