

2002 Edition, No.1, January - May

We are very pleased to bring you another issue of the Food Security News hoping once again to reach more and more people who could help deliver justice to those who suffer from hunger and its far-reaching ill effects.

2002 Edition, Food Security News , No.1, January – May

Editorial

By John Greene

We are very pleased to bring you another issue of the Food Security News hoping once again to reach more and more people who could help deliver justice to those who suffer from hunger and its far-reaching ill effects. We in the food security movement are continually discouraged to see so much of the public's attention dedicated to manufacturing hand outs while neglecting to recognize the limited effects of such efforts. In this context it is extremely uplifting to learn about the justice efforts of the United Church Food Aid Centre in St. John's. In this article Harold Guzzwell, director of that centre, will tell you about the ground breaking activities of that organization aimed at making meaningful progress in breaking the cycle of poverty. It is an initiative that we highly recommend to all food banks in this province and we congratulate the United Church for its leadership and example here.

As well Rev Wayne Cole of George Street United Church in St. John's tells us about how one organization serving a small clientele can make meaningful changes to the services they bring. Their outreach program has in effect adopted some basic components of the concept of food security and as such their work is an encouragement to all organizations however small to follow in the path of meaningful change.

Keith Davis says that the provincial and federal governments are failing the people of this province by not fulfilling commitments made over a quarter of a century ago. He points out that our adherence to the International Covenant on Human Rights requires that social assistance clients must have their basic need met. Yet he demonstrates how the latter is far from being reality in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Bev Brown points out some of the hypocrisy related to efforts by all levels of government to promote the concept of people taking responsibility for their own health. Yet, as she demonstrates, we are not given any choice on the subject of genetically modified foods. This issue of Food Security News has been brought to you by a group of Oxfam Volunteers consisting of Annette Stapenhorst, Bev Brown, Audrey Newbury, Colin MacDonald, Mike Brien and John Greene as chair. I would like to thank all those who helped with the articles and a special thank you to Mike Brien for doing the web and computer-related work so this issue could be made available to you.

The United Church Food Aid Centre By Harold Guzwell

The United Church Food Aid Centre in its present form, first opened its doors in 1989. Growing out of a small operation situated in Emmanuel House, the Centre is a creation of eight local United Churches in St. John's and Mt. Pearl. In 1999 St. Andrews Presbyterian Church joined with us as a full member. Several other Churches, while not formally a part of the organization, also offer support as well.

The Food Aid Centre is housed in Cochrane Street United Church and clientele enter through the Stewart Avenue entrance. Employing a Social Worker and a full-time Coordinator, the Centre now occupies much of the third floor of this historic building. In fact, many people, clients and associated congregations, often refer to the Centre as the "Cochrane Street Food Bank" or the "Stewart Avenue Food Bank".

The Centre filled approximately 350 hampers in 1989, serving about 1000 people. In 2001, over 5,300 people were served and 3,100 hampers were filled. Our busiest year, 1998, saw 1,000 people per month turn to the Centre for assistance!

In 1999, the Board of Directors decided to take a unique approach to the problem of providing emergency food relief to the needy. Close examination of our files revealed we were now serving the children of those people we first served in 1989! Clearly, the cycle of poverty was in full swing. A decision was made to hire a Social Worker and set out several new guidelines; 1. Ensure the food aid centre is operating at peak efficiency. 2. Examine ways to break the cycle of poverty. 3. Find ways to help empower clients.

Maintaining these conditions presented a daunting task on a limited budget. However, over the next three years, the Centre was physically re-structured to better enable volunteer staff to fill hampers and rotate stock. A Dietician was consulted and a commitment was made to have all regular hampers meet or exceed the Canada Food Guide Standards in every category. This involved establishing a Fresh Milk program which we believe is a first for Food Banks in this Province. Staff were given better training in the methods to examine donated / purchased food for quality control and were also trained in areas of staff/client interaction. For clients, coming to a Food bank is often a stressful and demeaning experience. Our staff seeks to make the experience as pleasant as possible, listen to people and offer words of encouragement. Having a Social Worker on staff enables the Centre to make professional "front-line" referrals to other Community Agencies. Since 1999, cooperation between our Centre and other agencies has grown tremendously.

The Centre also looked at why people on Assistance or trapped in low-paying jobs stayed there. We found there although there were many opportunities available, many people had been dependant on assistance for so long that there was a high degree of anxiety attached to change. People in lowpaying jobs, were often so burdened with debts so that to go back to school was out of the question. These are but two of the issues we discovered. There are many, many more. However, most people we serve were at least willing to try something to better their lives. Small steps!!! The Centre opened a Toy Lending Library in late 2000. Offering quality toys and educational material to families, this enabled them to spend a little bit more of their budget on food items. It also ensured that young children could avail themselves of the positive developmental components such as fine motor skills provided by quality toys.

A Community Garden Project is also underway. Located on Elizabeth Avenue, there are plans for about 80 "raised" garden plots to be installed over the next couple of years. Requests have been made from other agencies expressing an interest in these gardens and plans are to locate several at the Carew Lodge. These gardens are overseen by a Committee whose ranks include a horticulturist and Spring 2002 promises to be very busy!

In mid-2001, a pilot project was started using a nationally recognized program called the Basic Shelf. This program essentially involves preparing nutritious meals using 36 "basic" low-cost ingredients. A cookbook is provided and participants choose and prepare at least two meal courses per session. Other skills taught include budgeting, smart shopping, food storage and proper kitchen hygiene. It is very much a social setting and waiting lists for seat space is now common. Eight groups have been offered so far and interest is growing steadily.

The Centre has been working with HRE to offer people job-readiness skills. So far, two candidates have successfully "work-termed" with us. One has returned to Post-Secondary school and the second is successfully employed. In addition, the Centre is now setting up a "Computer Mentoring" program whereby people interested in learning basic skills will be matched with a Volunteer "Teacher". People with computer skills but who do not have access to a system, are able to book time with us. Access is provided to a computer, printer and a fax machine. Soon, an Internet hook-up will be available. Computers have been made available by two local businesses.

The United Church Food Aid Centre has evolved to be much more than what its name suggests. In a way, it is more a Community Resource Centre. As it continues to grow, several bold new initiatives are being looked at closely. If successful, they will revolutionize the Food Bank system in this Province and forever end the stigma of having to depend on hand-outs.

Harold Guzzwell is a registered Social Worker in Newfoundland and Labrador and is the Director of the United Church Food Aid Centre.

GM Foods – The Power of Choice **By Bev Brown**

A health article in the St. John's Telegram (Nov.24) called "Who pays?" discussed the possibility of patients assuming financial responsibility for the treatment of "self-inflicted" diseases brought on by smoking, obesity, alcohol abuse or lack of exercise. The article quoted health officials who say that because of escalating health costs, emphasis has to be on healthy lifestyles and that health promotion, disease prevention and education on health are also required. Placing responsibility on the individual for self-inflicted health problems would require the individual to adopt a healthy lifestyle now or pay up later for not having done so. The operative word here is choice.

Many people who have shaped up and adopted, or already had a healthy lifestyle, however, are feeling frustrated with the lack of choice of the foods with which they wish

to feed themselves and their families. This lack of nutritional power of choice is the result of insufficient labeling of food products.

Food companies across the country stock grocery shelves with genetically modified (GM) foodstuff. Food labeling is not mandatory and therefore consumers have no way of knowing which foods have been genetically modified. It has become clear from the numerous polls taken that the majority of Canadian consumers prefer not to eat genetically modified food given a choice. While no-one can know with certainty what the long term effects on health would be from eating GM foods, it seems many people prefer to err on the side of caution and consume foods produced in the traditional way or to purchase the costlier organic produce.

So what are GM foods? Genetically modified foods are produced from plants or animals which have had their genes changed in the laboratory by scientists. All living organisms have genes written in their DNA. They are the chemical instructions for building and maintaining life. By modifying the genes, scientists can alter the characteristics of a plant to improve desired traits such as increased resistance to herbicides, improved nutritional capacity, cold tolerance and resistance to disease, insects and weeds. This allows food production to be a more exact science and a greater amount of food can be grown in a shorter span of time on a smaller amount of land. Proponents of this method of food production believe it is the way to go to help solve the problems of world hunger, environmental pollution and the rapid depletion of the earth's arable lands. Opponents fear the rise of new food allergies due to GM soy and corn ingredients found in cereal, soup, tortilla chip, infant formula and soda. They also fear that other risks to health would include antibiotic resistance, increased pesticide use and contamination of organic and conventional farmers' crops. They believe there is already enough food to feed everyone if it were fairly distributed and that GM food production is motivated by profit. They argue that long term benefits of GM foods are speculative and maintain that there already exists scientific proof that organic food is healthier.

Allan Rock, the Minister of Health told The National Post, October 4, 2001 that mandatory labeling of all genetically modified foods imported or produced in Canada is necessary to respond to consumers growing demand to know what is in the food they eat. "We should be looking at the question of mandatory labeling," he said. "The bottom line is consumers want to have the information and they want to have a choice and to understand what it is they are eating." Mr. Rock supported Charles Caccia's private member's bill before parliament to amend the Food and Drug Act to require mandatory labeling of all foods or food ingredients that contain genetically altered materials. Unfortunately, despite pressure from consumers and Mr. Rock's backing, this bill was defeated in a vote by government members. It appears that the departments of Agriculture, Industry, and International Trade are in opposition to mandatory labeling due to concern about the impact such a ruling might have on farmers, trade and the food industry.

Canada, as Mr. Rock notes, needs to catch up with the rest of the world in establishing regulations governing genetically modified food, including the labeling of food. He points to the policy in Europe that requires any food that has been genetically modified to be labeled and similar rulings are expected to take effect in Japan, Australia and New Zealand in the next month or two. There are no mandatory regulations for GM foods in the United States. A campaign by consumers and environmental groups against large

food companies selling GM foods have taken place in the past year. One of the companies, Trader Joe's, bent to public pressure and promised that all its private label products would be GM free within the year. It was a battle well won considering eighty-five percent of Trader Joe's products carry the company's own private label. More recently there was a nationwide campaign to get Kraft, the largest food company in the United States, to go genetically modified free on November eighth. Engineered Food Alert, Free the Planet, Genetic Engineering and Action Network were among many such groups asking concerned consumers to call or email Kraft Foods on that day to protest their use of genetically modified ingredients. Maybe it is time Canadian consumers banded together to protest against our lack of choice in the kinds of foods we wish to buy.

Bev Brown is a social justice advocate based in St. John's.

The Jimmy Pratt Memorial Outreach Centre By Rev. Wayne Cole

On Sunday, December 23rd at 11 a.m., George Street United Church gathered for a special service to celebrate and dedicate a new facility designed to provide further outreach possibilities to the Down Town Community of St. John's where they have been based for over 129 years.

The congregation has been striving to develop a strong Outreach Program for the Downtown Community for a number of years. One priority that has been identified is the need to help subsidize the programs that currently exist to provide warm nutritious meals to those in need of such a service. For such a program to be undertaken the Church's Kitchen Facilities required some major renovations, which required securing additional capital for the project to commence.

Traditionally the Pratt Family has worshiped at George Street United. Rev. John Pratt served here 1875-1877. The congregation was overjoyed when Ms Kathy Pratt LeGrow offered to underwrite the renovations and dedicate the new facility in memory of her brother Jimmy.

We have wanted to be more involved in meeting the needs of the people of this area for a long time. This (soup Kitchen) is the first step. At present we serve 18-30 people on Fridays. It is hoped that soon there will be people identified among those that come to partake, who can be enabled to come early and help prepare the food in hope that the group can become self sufficient in preparing and serving. A second program soon to get underway is The Basic Shelf. In that program people are taught to prepare nutritious meals from a very basic grocery shelf. We have known for some time that within the Downtown Core there are many people who struggle to live on meager incomes. Some live in rooming houses with little or no cooking facilities. Some have no cooking skills, others struggle to cook and dine alone , eating being such a social event.

The renewed focus on outreach has given new life to our congregation and an opportunity to give God thanks in a tangible way for all that we receive by helping those who are less fortunate.

Rev Cole is the minister for George Street United Church in St. John's.

Income Support Legislation By Keith Davis

Canada as a member of the United Nations has signed a number of United Nations covenants promising to implement and to guarantee certain human rights for all Canadians. The primary United Nations covenant governing social assistance or income support is the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights which Canada signed in 1976.

Article 9 of this covenant says "The States Parties to the present convention recognize the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance." This means that once need has been established citizens have a right to income support. Applicants for income support should not have to meet other requirements or preconditions, such as mandatory career counseling, in order to receive benefits. It would also be a violation of this covenant to require recipients to work for any form of income support. Article 6, Section 1 recognizes "the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts ..." This article also states that government must "take appropriate steps to safeguard this right." This means that any form of workfare is in violation of this covenant.

Despite having signed this covenant more than twenty-six years ago, the Government of Canada as well as the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador have a very poor record of compliance. To take one example Article 11 recognizes "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right". Article 11 also recognizes "the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger..." and states that government must take measures to ensure this right. It is blatantly evident that our provincial government is not in compliance with this article. We have one of the highest poverty rates in Canada. On a per capita basis we have one of the highest rates of food bank usage in the country.

Certainly we have the highest rate of child poverty of all the provinces. Many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are hungry or at the very least inadequately nourished. Many cannot afford or secure adequate housing and have great difficulty in heating their homes during the colder months of the year. Clearly social assistance is too low and does not permit recipients to afford an adequate standard of living.

In order for people to make progress in their lives they must first have their basic needs met. They must have adequate accommodations, nutrition, clothing, medical and dental care, etc. It makes no sense to expect people to prepare for the future when they are not even prepared for the present. Clients who lack the basic necessities of life are not in a very favourable position to avail of career counseling and training. They are more concerned about trying to survive from cheque to cheque. The role of the Department of

Human Resources should be to ensure that the basic needs of clients are met. There are other government departments which could deliver services such as career counseling, training, and employment information. The Department of Human Resources could facilitate clients' entry into the labour market or into educational or training programs by helping clients to remove the barriers to work or to training when they are ready to take that step in their lives. For the provincial government the most pragmatic approach towards providing employment and training services would be to ask the federal government to agree to open the services of Human Resources Development Canada to the general public. This could be achieved through the federal/provincial Labour Market Development Agreement. There should be no need for the Department of Human Resources and Employment to develop parallel infrastructures, services, and programs when the federal government already has them in place.