



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Alberta leads the country in increased food bank use.

Airdrie AB – Food bank usage was up marginally across Canada this year, but the picture in Alberta was a stark contrast, with an increase of more than 23% over 2014.

According to national *HungerCount* statistics released today in Ottawa, Alberta experienced the highest jump nationally with a record 67,443 people accessing a food bank during the month of March. The national increase in food bank use was just 1.3%.

“Sadly, the surge was not wholly unexpected because the economic landscape in Alberta has changed drastically over the last 18 months,” says Stephanie Rigby, executive director of Alberta Food Banks, the provincial food bank association.

Globally, the price of oil dropped from more than \$100 a barrel in March of 2014 to \$50 this March. This drop led directly to the lay-off of 35,000 people in the oil and gas sector in Canada. Overall unemployment in Alberta increased by 10% from March, 2014 to March, 2015.

The provincial job market has tightened. In addition to layoffs, workers are not retiring as early as they used to, seniors are returning to the workforce and the business closures are forcing household incomes down. In spite of the job losses and income reductions, the costs of consumer goods have remained high or have increased, and the cost of housing remains very high.

These adjustments have placed huge pressures on lower skilled workers and modest income families to earn enough to survive. Many families have fallen further behind and many are forced to turn to food banks for support.

One-third of those using food banks in Alberta report they are working – that is more than two times the national average. What type of income someone is making matters a great deal.

“There are stumbling blocks that hinder people from moving forward,” says Ms. Rigby. “These can be removed through access to re-training, education, and grant funding for training programs to address root causes of food insecurity for the most vulnerable – the working poor, the unemployed, and the underemployed.”

Across Alberta, 75% of food banks reported an increase in demand for services in 2015. Significant increases were seen in Calgary, Edmonton, Parkland County, Samson First Nation, Wood Buffalo, Red Deer, Athabasca, Olds, and Medicine Hat.

While 18 food banks initially reported decreases in March, by summer many of those were facing a very different state.

While the first five months of 2015 saw the Airdrie Food Bank’s average usage increase marginally (5% for hampers and 7% for bread & extras program), the following five months witnessed a drastic increase (39% for hampers and 45% for bread & extras program) compared to the same time period in 2014.

The Airdrie Food Bank increase in people accessing the Airdrie Food Bank programs includes many families with children. The biggest reason is due to the recent downturn in the economy. People have depleted their savings and are desperate to not lose their homes as well. The food bank is doing what it can to help them through this difficult time.

In St. Albert, where numbers had fallen steadily for the past year, due in part to their solution-focused approach to food insecurity, June's numbers jumped and were the highest on record for that month in 8 years.

"We saw our first increase in food bank use in late spring and that demand has continued to grow month after month over last year's figures," says Suzan Krecsy, executive director of the St. Albert Food Bank.

Food banks are increasingly broadening their scope to help address the root causes of hunger.

"Food banks have recognized collecting and sharing food alone is not the answer. Many now work proactively to connect people with programs and help move them out of food insecurity," says Ms. Rigby.

For many food banks it is not within their reach to provide enhanced services, especially when usage increases have stretched their capacity.

Ten percent of food banks in Alberta reported they ran out of food at one point in the last year, forcing more than half of those food banks to purchase more food and one-third to shrink the size of the hampers they offered.

More than half the food banks in Alberta are completely run by volunteers and all rely primarily on public donations to support their work.

It has now been seven years since food bank use in this province reached a low point of 33,837 individuals in March 2008. The need for food banks spiked drastically in 2009 and has hovered at record levels ever since.

"We need to start a new conversation in Alberta to determine the best course of action to tackle food security challenges," says Ms. Rigby.

"Our food banks feed thousands every day but we want to move past that and cooperatively find solutions for people to overcome the challenges that brought them to the food bank in the first place."

"The community of Airdrie has been so generous and we truly appreciate it," says Lori McRitchie, Executive Director of the Airdrie Food Bank, "The problem is that we are going through food faster than we have ever before. We had a city wide food drive in September which filled our warehouse and we are watching that food dwindle down quickly. We need food and funds to meet the increased demand."

People wanting to help out during this crisis can donate online at www.airdriefoodbank.com or donate non-perishable food. The food bank has a What's Needed List on their website which is updated frequently.

Food Banks Canada collects data from 3,000 food-related organizations across Canada each year and compiles the annual *HungerCount* report.

Key facts from *HungerCount* 2015:

- Food bank usage in Alberta was up 23% over last year – the highest jump in the country.
- Food banks in Alberta helped 67,443 people in March.
- 27,803 children received food from a food bank in Alberta in one month.
- 75% of the food banks in Alberta reported an increase in demand for services.
- Who is being helped by food banks in Alberta hasn't changed that much since last year – 40% are children, nearly 60% are families and 33% of those households were single parent families.
- 30% of food bank clients were working – virtually unchanged since last year.
- 852,137 people received food from a food bank in Canada and 284,046 were children.
- 167 organizations across Canada participated in the survey in 2015.

Key facts about Airdrie Food Bank 2015:

Hamper Program

- Airdrie Food Bank provided hampers to 4076 people between January and October 2015 of which 1832 (45%) were children
- Overall year-to-date hamper usage is 21% higher and number of people fed through hampers is 23% higher compared to the same time period in 2014
 - Jan to May – number of hamper increased 5%; number of people fed by hampers increased 1%
 - Jun to Oct – number of hamper increased 39%; number of people fed by hampers increased 50%
 - Highest month: September with an increase of 71% in number of hampers and 103% increase in number of people fed by hampers

Bread and Extra Program

- Overall year-to-date usage of the Bread & Extras Program is 24% higher with the number of people fed 40% higher compared to the same time period in 2014
 - Jan to May – number of families increased by 7%; number of people fed increased 18%
 - Jun to Oct – number of families increased 45%; number of people fed increased 60%
 - Highest month: August with an increase of 73% in number of families and 101% increase in number of people fed

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