

## ReFresh helping to meet the growing demand on food banks

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Halton's food distribution program, ReFresh, is helping food banks in the area cope with the alarming increase in clients.

Marcus Logan, ReFresh Food's program director, says despite the economic downturn, local companies are still eager to contribute.

"More and more companies are calling us saying, we have all this food so come and get it," said Logan. "With our refrigerator truck, we can do this on a larger scale."

ReFresh was launched in December 2008 by the charity, Food for Life. The organization collects fresh foods such as vegetables and meat, frozen foods from restaurants and food from farmers, grocery stores and corporate suppliers. They then donate the products to food banks and front-line service agencies in Halton.

This month, ReFresh will be participating in the National Hunger Count, a data collection initiative that provides a monthlong picture of how many people are accessing emergency food programs at food banks and food programs in the region, and throughout Canada. According to Logan, this is the first time Halton will be accounted for on a larger scale.

"In previous years, the need in Halton has been underestimated because there has only been one or two food banks submitting information. Because ReFresh is a member of the Ontario Food Bank Association (OFBA), all our members are required to participate in this data collection," said Logan.

According to a December report released by the OFBA, in the past year food banks in Ontario have experienced a 13-per-cent increase in the number of people they serve. The report also noted that one in five food banks in Ontario do not have enough supplies to meet the needs of those they serve, and 20 per cent of food banks must purchase more than 40 per cent of their food supply in order to meet the demand.

In Halton, food banks serve 15,000 people. But it is estimated that an additional 16,000 people are in need of food bank services. Local food banks are only able to fill 10 per cent of their client's food needs.

Mina Wahidi, director of the Burlington charity Compassion Society, says over the last five months, she has noticed a dramatic increase in the amount of people accessing the charity's service. ReFresh distributes to Compassion Society and Wahidi says people are very appreciative of the program.

"It's really, really nice extras," said Wahidi. "Cookies, juices, fruit. It's not leftovers; it's nice food. Times are tough, so here is something to enjoy."

Logan says he's receiving a lot of positive feedback from the community. "They're like, wow, it's different types of food. We're getting salads and fresh vegetables. We've been able to introduce healthier foods into the food bank system," he said.