Shutting food bank first step in program to add respect to feeding hungry:

Keenan | Toronto Star, February 9, 2015

How do you help people who cannot afford to feed themselves? In trying to answer that question just over eight years ago in Woodstock, Ont., Stephen Giuliano started by shutting down the local food bank.

"Programs that are created to specifically address the needs of the poor almost always end up becoming poor programs," Giuliano says in his sparsely furnished basement office attached to a United Church. "We need a paradigm shift." He's the director of Operation Sharing, an organization that offers a range of community service programs to residents of Oxford County, two hours west of Toronto. For decades, a food bank was among those programs, but Giuliano thought it had become a poor program, and he thought he had a better idea.

Instead of collecting and warehousing food and then giving it to people in need (whether it was the kind of food they wanted or needed or not), Operation Sharing set up a new program, called Food for Friends. People donate at the cash registers of their local grocery stores where cashiers invite them to give a quarter each time they shop. That money funds food cards given to recipients that are good only for non-taxable items (most staples are not taxable, most junk food is), who can shop for themselves.

It removes a lot of the obvious inefficiency in the food bank system — no need for trucks to ship thousands of pounds of cans all around town and back, no need for armies of volunteers to sort donations and assemble boxes, no need for warehouses to store it all. But better yet, Giuliano says, it provides an element of dignity to the recipients, allowing them the control over what food they have the option to eat. When he himself relied on a food bank as a young man in London, Ont., he says, he found the experience humiliating. He likes to think giving people the means to shop for themselves is less so.

Wendy Oldham has received help from Food for Friends since it began, and agrees it is a more dignified. "What I like, if you can get your cart and go up and down the aisles, picking the things you like, just like normal people." Her phrasing suggests the shift in perspective: being handed a box of food sorted and chosen by other people makes recipients feel like they aren't *normal people*. They say beggars can't be choosers, a phrase embodied by being given the food others chose to give you. But Food for Friends suggests you can be a chooser. And it's hard to see why their approach is wrong.

Of course, the people who donate to standard food bank programs also like to feel

good: there's something tangible about donating food, and about volunteering to do the physical work sorting and transporting it requires. But when people raise objections of that sort — the reasons donors and volunteers like food banks — he simply says, "Who are we doing this for?"

Now in its ninth year, the program has always raised enough money to provide the level of help Giuliano calculated would be required to provide the same level of assistance the old food boxes did — usually $60 a month for families, $20-$25 a month for individuals.

There are about 275 families in Oxford County now served by the program, Giuliano says, in the towns of Woodstock and Ingersoll, and the program generates about $75,000 to $90,000 per year to serve them. No money is taken out of donations towards administrative costs — 100 per cent of donations are given back to recipients in the form of food cards. This is possible partly because Giuliano's salary as a chaplain and the rent for Operation Sharing's office are covered by other grants and donations, and partly because the simplicity of the program means there are very few other costs involved.

Food for Friends does accept some donations of taxable items the food cards are ineligible to buy, especially diapers, baby food, and feminine hygiene products, and Giuliano shows me the tiny storage closet that holds them. Recipients are given some of those items when they pick up their card, if they need them. Eventually Giuliano would like to free the cards of their non-taxable-only status, but he says the community is more accepting if they are assured their money won't be spent on pop and chips.

I visited the local Foodland, where owner Chris Chapman says the program has been a great alternative to the old food bank bins at the front of his store, where often people brought in expired items, or donated unhelpful things like pumpkin pie filling. "It didn't make a lot of sense. This is a better way."

He says people in need are better off buying their own fresh vegetables and bread. Chapman's staff are encouraged to help people who request it know what items are non-taxable and how to stretch their dollars. He says ultimately the program may be good for his business, too. The money collected in donations often comes back to his store in the form of purchases, just as donations to a food bank are often purchased at grocery stores. "If I can treat someone with respect when they're on a downturn, and help feed people the way they'd like to be fed, then maybe when they get off that downturn, I've got myself another customer."

Chapman acknowledges one potential obstacle, from a food vendor's point of view, is that traditional food banks offered a place to donate warehoused food that was on the verge of expiry. But he says other worthwhile food programs such as soup kitchens still offer places to ensure those types of goods don't go to waste.

It's such a simple, elegant, and sensible solution, proven to work at the scale of

Oxford County, that I hope it can be a model for larger charitable networks, such as the vast Daily Bread Food Bank network in Toronto. I spent time writing about the network and how it works (See Keenan's article on this blog) before Christmas, and was both awed by the generosity of those involved — and by how many people were involved — but staggered by the resources it takes to ship food all around the city; millions of dollars in transportation and warehousing, millions of volunteer hours in labour.

Food for Friends appears to offer a better alternative. One that is far more operationally efficient but also more effective in serving the needs of recipients, and offering them more dignity.

Giuliano is trying to take the same approach in Operation Sharing's other programs, such as the soup kitchen, winter homeless shelter, disability support and children's services. He's even started a think tank program for innovative approaches to poverty. "Integrative, holistic, proactive" is his mantra as he speaks passionately about all those ideas.

But he remains passionate about the Food for Friends program, hoping to see the model adopted across the country, and around the world. "If there's a reason it doesn't work, I haven't heard it yet," he says when asked if a program like this could scale up to meet the needs of a population like Toronto's.

At the very least, I'd hope to see the model tried out as a pilot program here. If it were, Giuliano is confident it could provide a model to change not just how we feed the hungry, but how we think about addressing poverty. "I think we could make history here," he says.

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