

AS THE PANDEMIC CARRIES ON



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Ottawa Food Bank



Ottawa Food Bank
La Banque d'alimentation d'Ottawa

Introduction

For many, March 2020 feels like it was both yesterday and a decade ago. This was when we all learned the Novel Coronavirus had reached Ottawa, and we had officially become part of the global pandemic.

While the impact has been felt greatly by some and modestly by others, there is no denying everyone's everyday has changed. For food banks and their clients, that impact has been substantial.

About the Ottawa Food Bank

The Ottawa Food Bank is the main emergency food provider in the National Capital Region, which works in partnership with a network of over 100 community food programs to provide food and supplies for tens of thousands of people each month – over one third of whom are children. With a focus on fresh and nutritious food, and always looking for ways to better provide to the network and the community, the Ottawa Food Bank's vision is healthy, accessible, sustainable food for all.

About this report

This report examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Ottawa Food Bank from its onset in March 2020 until October 2021. "Impact" includes additional spending, operational changes, and innovation to programming we have undertaken to continue to meet the community and member agency network's changing needs.

If you would like more in-depth information regarding health and safety changes as well as how the Ottawa Food Bank and the network of member agencies consulted with Ottawa Public Health near the onset of the pandemic, please read our initial account from January 2021, [*A Year of Crisis & Kindness: Ottawa Food Bank COVID-19 Report*](#).

Message from the CEO



This pandemic has been an incredibly challenging time for everyone including the Ottawa Food Bank, the network of over 100 member agencies, and their clients.

We have all watched the rise and fall of case numbers, while experiencing multiple waves and various levels of shutdowns, which result in greater need within our community. During this time, the Ottawa Food Bank has delivered more food and resources than ever before in our 38-year history.

The vaccine has brought hope by introducing a new tool of defense for the community. We worked closely with Ottawa Public Health on a neighbourhood approach to share information about the availability of vaccines with those accessing food banks. We held registration clinics in various languages to help increase vaccine accessibility in high-risk communities.

During the sunny and warm months of 2021, with many of us being partially or fully vaccinated, food banks were able to provide services outside and safely meet with neighbours again. Then in the fall and winter, we were met with the challenges associated with a fourth and fifth wave; the community and the network of food banks continued to adapt and work hard to support their neighbours.

While we hope 2022 will provide some much-needed relief from the pandemic, we are preparing for an ongoing and increased need in our city. Following the 2008 recession, the need at food banks across the country increased by 28% and it took two to three years for food bank numbers to reach that peak. Scarier still – the demand on food banks in Canada has yet to dip back below pre-2008 numbers. While it is difficult to predict the long-term effects of the pandemic, we foresee a similar steady increase over the next 24 months. We are now preparing to be able to sustain the level of food, support, and service at the pandemic level for the foreseeable future.

Since March 2020, the increased need would not have been met without the incredible community support as well as the resilience and commitment of staff and volunteers at our member agencies. Our own volunteers have been gracious and understanding as we reduced numbers onsite, built plexiglass dividers, and adjusted volunteer roles. They have helped sort millions of pounds of food, delivered to homes across the city, and kept our warehouse clean and safe. We are truly an organization by the community, for the community, with everyone playing an important role.

This has been a challenging first year as the CEO of the Ottawa Food Bank. I am incredibly grateful to the staff, Board of Directors, volunteers, donors, and partners who have helped me navigate through these unprecedented and ever-changing times. I am humbled and honoured to hold this role and look forward to continuing our work together to make our city stronger for all.

Rachael Wilson
CEO
Ottawa Food Bank

Operations as the pandemic carries on

When the pandemic began, it was evident there was going to be increased expenses to properly and safely provide for the member agency network and the community during a time of crisis. What was not clear was just how long the pandemic would last; this is still an unknown.

Thanks to the incredible Ottawa community, and all who recognized that food banks needed extra support, we have been able to respond appropriately to this increase in demand.

A look at related spending

Figure I illustrates how community support helped the Ottawa Food Bank respond to the increased demand on our resources during the pandemic. To put dollar amounts into perspective, we have compared the expense lines from the same period a few years prior. The comparison examines the same period in 2017-2018, which is the last time the Ottawa Food Bank wasn't responding to a crisis (ie. In late 2018, the Ottawa Food Bank responded to the devastating affects of six tornados in our city).

The pandemic has brought with it new expenses including our new Home Delivery Program (more details on page 7), personal protective equipment, and facility safety upgrades. The Ottawa Food Bank would not have been able to take on this extra responsibility without the generous community who made it possible.

FIGURE I: Spending Comparison

| | 2017-2018 | 2020-2021 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Non-Perishable Food | \$1,974,569 | \$3,502,779 |
| Fresh Food | \$222,375 | \$928,906 |
| Boxes | \$74,272 | \$108,714 |
| Home Deliveries | | \$461,591 |
| Innovation / Agencies | | \$1,429,379 |
| COVID-19 Specific Expenses* | | \$3,052,525 |
| TOTAL | \$ 2,271,216 | \$8,814,307 |



*COVID-19 specific expenses include increased health and safety measures; personal protective equipment; increased staffing; agency funding to upgrade facilities so they met COVID-19 safety guidelines, can move to online appointment scheduling, hire and train staff, and purchase more of their own food to help meet the need of the community.

It should be noted that this is a simplified look at expenses and does not include lines such as administration, fundraising, and operational costs. The purpose of this was to show the increase in food and supply spending, as well as the additional expenses required to meet the requirements of the pandemic.

Thank you to all who donated making it possible for the Ottawa Food Bank to keep up with demand and respond to new needs in the community.

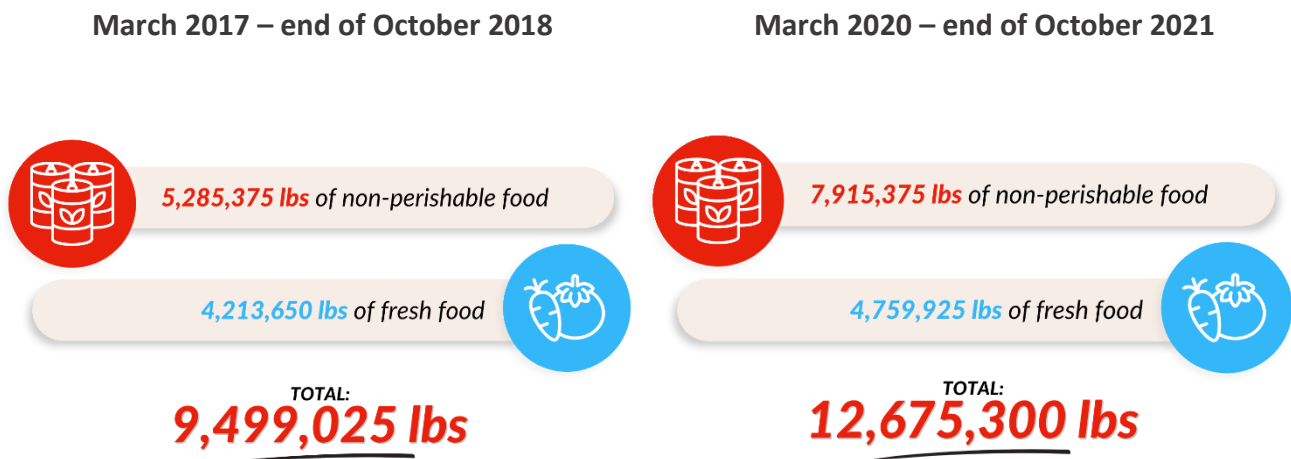
A look at food distribution

The Ottawa Food Bank increased the amount of food distributed compared to the 2017-2018 timeframe by 33 per cent. The need to send more food out the door is a response to the increase in

demand, but also the promise to help provide more food to each food bank visitor so they can stay home and stay safe for longer periods of time.

Below is a direct comparison of how much food was distributed to the network of member agencies across the city, as well as directly to people’s homes through the Home Delivery Program.

FIGURE II: Food Distribution Comparison



It should be noted that the amount of food distributed during the pandemic would have been higher had the Ottawa Food Bank and network of member agencies not made the decision to distribute grocery store gift cards, rather than food, for a period of time near the start of the pandemic.

This necessary action was taken to give the Ottawa Food Bank warehouse time to catch up to the demand and alleviate the possibility of burnout, while staff and volunteers were adjusting to the new way of operating. During that time, more than \$318,000 worth of grocery store gift cards were provided to people in Ottawa.

A look at getting food directly to people’s homes

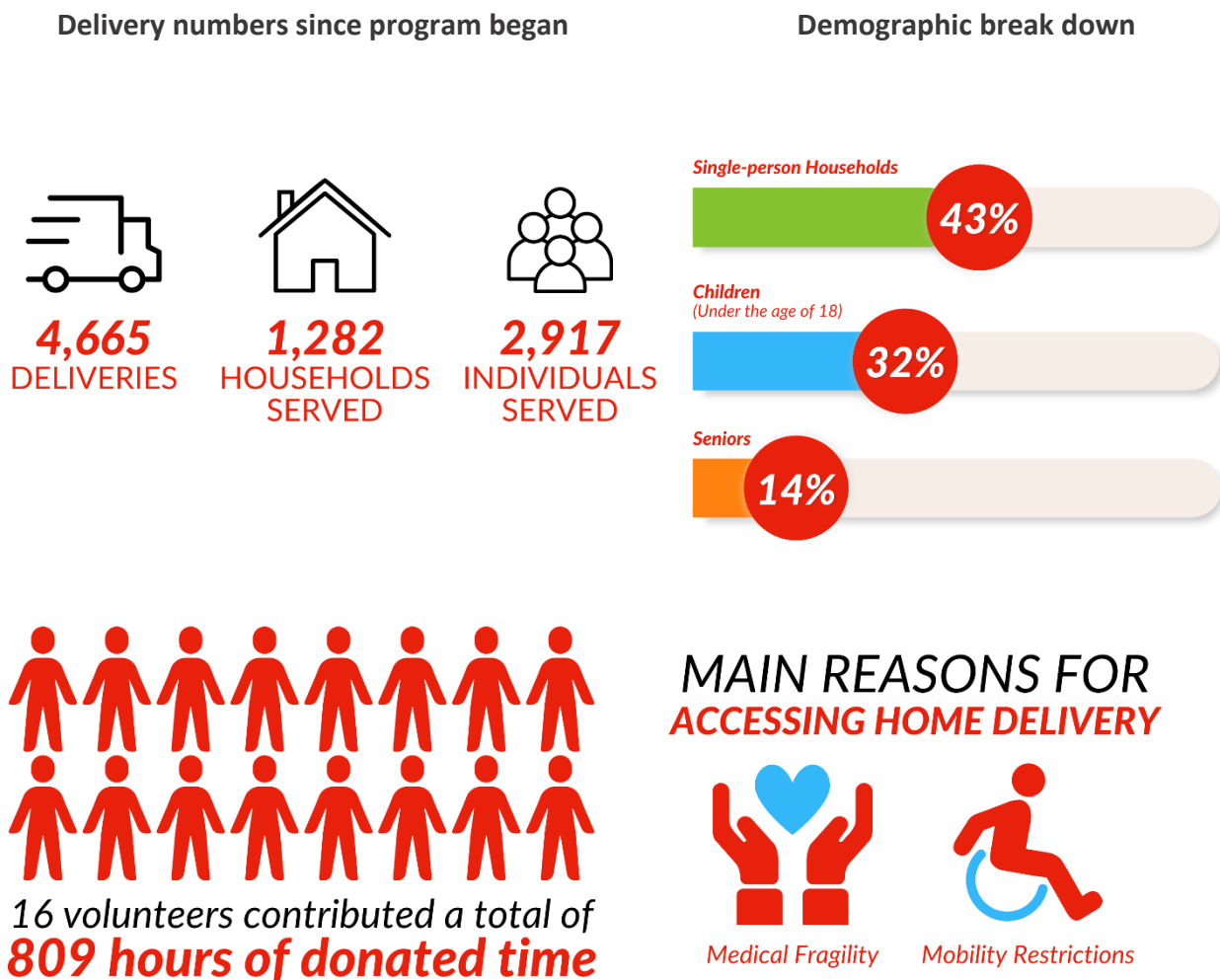
It was clear from the onset of the pandemic that if a delivery program was not implemented, many people in our region would not have access to food due to an inability to leave their homes. We were able to mobilize quickly in launching the program thanks to incredible support from groups like The Salvation Army and the United Muslim Organizations of Ottawa-Gatineau. Now our Home Delivery Program is run by Ottawa Food Bank staff and volunteers.

It should be noted that several programs within the member agency network of community food programs also run their own delivery programs within their catchments. This service has been

incredibly appreciated by their clients.

People experiencing food insecurity can access home delivery if they are unable to leave their home for reasons including self-isolation/illness, mobility restrictions, medical fragility, age, or if they are a single parent with young children and can't take them to their food program.

FIGURE III: Home Delivery Program Snapshot



Thank you to everyone who has supported this program and all who work so hard to ensure we can reach those in our city who would otherwise go without adequate food.

A look at the hard work of food programs across the city

Food programs across the city who provide a hot meal, a supply of groceries, and wrap-around services have been working hard to ensure they can continue to provide for their communities and keep up with an increase in demand, while keeping their staff, volunteers, and clients safe.

We are deeply grateful for the dedication of the staff and volunteers at food programs with whom we partner in Ottawa. They have adapted their services, kept up with health and safety protocols, and met the demand in their communities. They have put their neighbours first during a time when it is difficult to be there for one another face-to-face.

To be able to continue to provide, member agencies have adapted to change, time and again. They have moved to appointment model service, at times shifted to providing pre-packaged hampers or gift cards only, and covered for one another when a neighbouring program has made the tough decision to temporarily close their doors out of an abundance of caution.

Through it all – these programs have also used this time to innovate their programming and participate in pilot projects to make food banking better for all.

To assist the network of food programs across the city, we have done everything we can to provide them with what they need to help their clients, including:

FIGURE IV: Supporting the Work of the Network



We could not do it without your help

Volunteers

Throughout the pandemic, our volunteers have shown up. Even after we had to cancel all volunteer activity for two weeks in April 2020 out of an abundance of caution, volunteers continued to call and email asking how they could help once we re-opened our doors to them.

Changes made to the volunteer program during the pandemic to keep staff and volunteers safe:

- Many event volunteer opportunities were cancelled
- Implemented smaller group sizes at the farm and in the warehouse
- Have temporarily cancelled shifts for truck and reception assistants due to proximity issues
- Limiting volunteer shifts in our warehouse to a set roster of individuals to decrease the number of new people coming through our doors
- Adapted the workflow and set up in our warehouse to allow for physical barriers and physical distance
- Implemented a self-screening and check in system

As a result of these changes, we have seen:

- 303 fewer volunteers compared to the year* before, however, only a decrease in 100 hours donated!

*The referenced year is fiscal (Oct. 2019-Sept. 2020)

Thank you to all the amazing volunteers who have stuck with us throughout the pandemic. We have seen fewer volunteers willing to take on **more** work, and that is just incredible. We would not be able to provide the quantity of food we do without you. We cannot wait to fully re-open our doors once again and invite all our volunteers back.

Donors

Donors have been incredibly generous during the pandemic, as they recognize the essential role food banks play during a crisis and increased time of need. The community has come together and supported us and the network of community food programs, reinforcing that the Ottawa Food Bank is truly an organization by and for the community.

Thank you to the many people and organizations who have come together to plan events and fundraising initiatives in support of the Ottawa Food Bank. The list below is a small sample of the incredible third-party support we have received:

- 36 Chambers OttaWU Tshirts
- Chris Griffin Art Auctions
- CROWvid19 Fundraiser – David Harries
- OnlyTakesOne – Ava
- CHEO's Pediatric Residents Online Fundraiser
- Nutrition International Matching Campaign

Also thank you to the organizations and individuals who have made major donations to specifically to aid with our pandemic relief efforts. For a complete list of those who have shared their generosity during these trying times, please refer to our Year in Review at ottawafoodbank.ca. Below we'd like to thank a few who have been exceptionally generous to us and the community:

- Amazon.com Inc
- City of Ottawa
- Dan & Kim Theriault
- Food Banks Canada
- Funders who supported *Food for Thought* initiative including Gary Zed, CLV Group, and Broccolini Construction Inc.
- In memory of John and Susanne Graham
- Leacross Foundation
- Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Thistledown Foundation
- Viral Clean Canada

Even if you haven't seen your name on these lists, please know that your kindness has been seen and appreciated. Thank you all who have helped us throughout the course of the pandemic and beyond.

Conclusion

There is still much uncertainty when it comes to the pandemic and how much longer it will last. Through it all, the Ottawa Food Bank will continue to be here for the network of community food programs, for their clients, and for our neighbours. That will not change.

Again, the lasting impacts of the pandemic cannot be predicted, but our closest indicator as to what to expect is what food banks across the country saw following the recession of 2008. After the recession, food bank usage in Canada went up by 28 per cent. This increase didn't happen overnight, but rather took approximately two years to reach its peak. Food bank usage across the country has yet to fall back below pre-2008 recession numbers.

Near future (Fall of 2022) plans for the Ottawa Food Bank include a move into a new location, better suited for our growing size and role. The new facility will have increased warehouse and office space, higher ceilings to allow for more racking to store non-perishable donations and increased cold storage for fresh and frozen items. This dramatically increased cold storage will save us tens of thousands of dollars a month on food costs as we will no longer have to turn down donations of these items due to lack of capacity. This increased capacity for food will not only be cost saving but will help us respond to the higher demand we anticipate seeing.

The incredible support we have received so far has not only helped us with our immediate needs but is helping us plan for that possible increase once the pandemic is over. As need in the community continues to rise, there is the very real possibility that financial support may lessen as normalcy returns to our lives. This is a reality we must plan and prepare for now.

We need our supporters to know that "normal" is not going to be the same for everyone as the pandemic has impacted our neighbours in various ways including loss of jobs and decreased work hours. We were here to help people before the pandemic, and we will be here for all who need us after the pandemic. Thank you to all who will make it possible for us to continue to do so.