

## The Inspirational Food Bank Vision for a Hunger-Free Ontario

by Ralph C. Martin

“None asked of any other in the countryside, ‘How are you fed?’ None asked anything, except of himself, ‘How shall I be fed this day?’ Parents asked ‘How shall we be fed and our children?’”

Pearl S. Buck, The Good Earth

Like Hugh Segal, a recently retired Conservative senator, I am an advocate for a Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) policy in Canada. This is sometimes referred to as a negative tax system whereby families and individuals below the poverty threshold are paid a monthly amount to bring them up to an income required for a Canadian living. In Canada, hunger is a function of poverty, rather than food scarcity. A guaranteed annual income could effectively address hunger.

A trial from 1974 to 1978, to provide all members of a Manitoba community with a guaranteed annual income, showed that there was almost no reduction in hours worked except for women who chose to stay home with young children, elderly parents or disabled family members. Hugh Segal points out that it would actually be more cost effective for federal and provincial governments to fund a national GAI policy than to carry on with the plethora of programs to assist people with disabilities, job losses, marriage breakdowns and other propellants to poverty. Current programs require excessive administration and only partially alleviate poverty.

It is unlikely that such a GAI policy will be implemented soon in Canada. In the meantime, in this wealthy country, we are still compelled to evaluate better options to respond to hunger.

According to the Ontario Association of Food Banks (OAFB) ([www.oafb.ca](http://www.oafb.ca)) 375,000 individuals are served by a food bank in Ontario each month and about one third of these are children. As sad as this reality is, their vision statement, “a hunger-free Ontario,” is succinct and clear. It inspires.

We owe a debt of gratitude to all who give their life energy, time and money to reduce hunger. They do not turn away. Others do, thus impoverishing complete living.

With respect and some anxiety, I question the OAFB requests for more money for infrastructure. I wonder what else we could do with money that is used to purchase and maintain food bank warehouses, trucks and fuel. There is plenty of food in retail outlets. The problem is that hungry people face a financial barrier to buy this food.

Food banks were at first expected to be temporary. Now about 30 years after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on infrastructure, there seems to be an acceptance that more of the same is required. What if this infrastructure money was allocated to hungry people for the specific purpose of buying the food they need, when they need it, at retail outlets closest to where they already live?

We use credit and debit cards for many purchases. Technology is available to restrict the use of cards for food. Card readers could be used at farmers' markets and all other retail outlets. Could food banks use their volunteers more effectively if their task was to assign monthly reloadable cards, to folks in need? If so, relatively little food bank infrastructure would be required.

To date, the federal and Ontario governments have not picked up the responsibility to directly provide food to hungry citizens. Should it be left to food banks to discern immediate food needs and to make food available? This is not an easy task in Canada, where poverty is often hidden, yet stubbornly persists for about 10% of the population. Access to tax records would clarify the process.

Food banks serve many yet do not operate with the luxury of universality (food available for everyone). Nevertheless, OAFB has goals of poverty reduction and maintaining dignity and respect among their clients and others. They have accomplished a lot.

A Toronto based organization, Food Share, does attempt to maintain universality as a principle, even while tackling hunger. Their website [www.foodshare.net](http://www.foodshare.net) asserts "We apply our program models to the direct needs of low-income communities in Toronto, implementing these

solutions universally, to remove stigma.” It is not clear to me that this program could be scaled to provincial or national levels.

The card system, noted above, would have the advantage of being quite discrete and users would not be easily distinguished from regular card users. While not universal, it could help to maintain dignity with anonymity and could address the real-time needs of many. In the past, hunger was addressed with the best available options. Can we step it up a notch, today?

Regardless of the conditions which result in some people being temporarily or persistently hungry, they will suffer, physically and mentally. We will all benefit from a hunger-free Ontario. Let’s lower the degrees of constraint experienced now by hungry people so they can more freely contribute love, art, ideas, work and more. The pie of dignity will be larger for all of us.

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