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CAWDB
Food Security Issues Committee
Presentation to the Board of Health
to be held on September 28, 2009

Good morning Ladies and Gentleman:

Introduction:

We are the Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits and our members have requested that we come before this committee this morning to speak to you about our growing concerns of the food bank system in the city and how it is failing the people and contributing to the growing health risks for those that struggle in poverty.

Council's decision to separate the development of a strategy for emergency food services (in the Community Services department) from the development of a food security plan for the city (in the food security advisory committee reporting to the Board of Health) is inefficient, counterproductive and confusing to the public.

We believe the CAWDB speaks for approximately 100,000 Hamilton residents--or one in five in our population--who live below the poverty line, in calling for recognition by City politicians that we have a serious and rapidly growing hunger crisis, and that Council must consolidate its two processes and give a high priority to quickly putting in place practical ways to meet the crisis.

Alarming facts:
We, in the Campaign see the current food bank system as "the wild west", not all food banks are inspected and those that are inspected, still give out food that is substandard. Our members and others in the community who are accessing these services often get food that is expired, rotten and moldy. There are often no labels so that people can determine if the food is expired, what it contains or is made of. For those who have food allergies, this is an accident waiting to happen.

The majority of the food is processed, high in sugar, fat and salt, fresh fruits and vegetables are given out infrequently and for those who have health conditions such as Diabetes or Celiac Disease are left with no choices except to put their own health at risk or starve.

Tuna is given out in almost unlimited amounts but the high levels of mercury in this seafood are also a concern. Mercury is a heavy metal and is poison to our bodies. The food banks do not give out warnings that eating too much of this can cause serious health problems.

We are extremely alarmed that many have seen their special diet funding slashed, which inhibits their ability to get the food items they need to maintain their health. We recently put on a forum on poverty and health and the health professionals who came and spoke indicated that many of their patients' health is at risk because incomes are so low they cannot afford to get what they need and that the food given out at the food banks, is detrimental to their health.

Since the city funds food banks, we believe it should ensure that the most stringent controls should be kept on the food given out to the most vulnerable in our city.
Solutions:

The city needs to have the same food inspection program that covers other food industries such as restaurants and post the inspection report for public display at all food banks. There needs to be posted on the doors a phone number where the people can complain about substandard or expired food, that ensures their confidentiality when they receive bad food. We acknowledge that the city has posted a "food safe zone" on their website but to date, there are no reports posted which cover any of the food banks in the city.

It would be more advantageous to give out food stamps or debit cards, where people can go and buy their own food, specific to their needs. There is a misconception that those who struggle cannot budget but that fallacy is far from the truth.

We advocate for more community gardens, even greenhouses so that people can have the opportunity to grow their own fruit and vegetables all year round. We also advocate for more local food as we know that many of our local farmers struggle to make ends meet. It would be better for the community, not only regarding health issues but from an economic standpoint as well.

Our local politicians should be doing more to push both the Federal and Provincial governments, on policies that would cover living wages, liveable amounts for those on social assistance would lessen the health costs in the years to come.

We thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak and we hope that our concerns will prompt positive action to alleviate the growing health issues for those that struggle.
1. Do you go to food banks?

   90% of the people attending (15) have used food banks; 70% monthly.
   (question for the future—are you single, do you have children?)

2. What was the service like?

   At first, most of the people when asked this question said they had no complaints. They said the service was good. Then 4 people said that they had been turned away from the Good Shephard and 2 from St Matthews because those food banks had met their daily quota. 2 people said they had been disappointed because the food banks were closed for most of the month of December.

3. What was the quality of the food?

   Everyone said they had experienced dented cans, spoiled bread or expired food. Some said their was infested and at least two had been given spoiled milk. They all agreed that they had no right to complain because the food was free. They all agreed that the food they got from churches was fresher. They never knew what they were going to get from the food bank-sometimes it was good and sometimes bad. 3 said the food was ok, 7 said mediocre, 7 said the poor but that was normal and they didn't expect anything better because it was free and they couldn't be selective.

4. Did the food cover your nutritional needs?

   They all agreed that the food did not meet their nutritional needs.
Those with special diets said that the food needed was not always available.

5. Do you feel you were treated as a person, with dignity?

   At first the majority answered this with-ok. Thye said they often had to line up for hours, some got discouraged and left, sometimes there were fights in the line over who was first. They like the Salvation Army the best because there was a room inside and they didn't have to line up outside. They commented that there is a clear separation between those getting food and those providing the service.

6. Do you have transportation issues?

   They all had transportation issues. They were never given bus tickets. You have to take everything they give you because you can only come once a month. At the grocery store, you can get as little as you can carry.

7. Is there access for those with disabilities?

   The Salvation Army is accessible, the others-no. They had comments about other kinds of accessibility - not everyone can access the food banks because they don't have ID or proof of poverty that food banks will accept. A lot of people wanted to have some sort of computer ID so that if they lost theirs they could still get food. Many were turned away because they did not have the proper ID.

**Conclusions and General comments:**

People's illnesses were caused and made worse by poor diet and nutrition.
The food banks need to buy local food so that the food would be more nutritious and fresher.
They want the government to be more accountable in terms of what it provides in services.
There should be enough money (living wage/realistic amounts of social assistance) so that people can buy their own food in grocery
stores and at the market
There should be no difference between OW and ODSP
The amounts people receive on OW is less than the basic personal
exemption amounts of both federal and provincial tax returns.
Some expressed fear in the advocacy work because they fear that
the food banks will close and that they would be left with nothing.
They all agreed that they do not have the right to complain because
the food is free. We see that as fear, that people feel that they do not
have right to complain about receiving substandard food
or services that fail to meet their needs.
The money spent on infrastructure should be spent on food instead