

<https://www.guelphmercury.com/news-story/10865220-demand-for-weekend-student-food-program-exceeds-capacity-in-guelph/>

Demand for weekend student food program exceeds capacity in Guelph

Food4Kids carries on year-round, feeding 400 kids on weekends and school holidays

Jessica Lovell
Guelph Mercury
Monday, March 13, 2023



In March of 2018, Food4Kids Guelph launched as a small pilot project aiming to provide a weekend supplement to school meal programs at three local elementary schools. Since then, the program has expanded significantly, but it is still unable to meet all of the need.

Five years in, the charity sends home food packages with 400 children from 30 of Guelph's 39 elementary schools each week. But there is a wait-list of children who need the support, with funding being the main barrier to providing it.

“We have a big push right now to just raise more money so that we don’t have a wait list,” said Terrie Jarvis, a volunteer board member with [Food4Kids Guelph](#).

The organization has a fundraising campaign running in March aiming to get people to commit to making monthly donations. Each time a person signs up to make a monthly donation of \$20 or more, [CanadaHelps](#) will donate an additional \$20.

When the program first started as a Rotary Club pilot project, the aim was to support children from food-insecure homes who were benefiting from student nutrition programs during the week, but lacked access to nutritious food on the weekends.

By the following year, the program had become an independent charity, sending home food with close to 100 children on Friday afternoons.

That number has continued to grow.

“Since the beginning of COVID, we’ve doubled,” said Jarvis.

The organization works closely with the Wellington Catholic and Upper Grand school boards to identify schools with high-needs families. School staff refer the families.

Volunteers at Food4Kids fill bags with healthy foods; these bags are then packed in boxes, which volunteer drivers deliver to the schools on Friday mornings. School staff discretely distribute them to kids, sometimes placing them directly into backpacks.

Discretion is part of reducing the stigma, explained Brittany Skelton, Food4Kids program manager, and the organization’s only paid staff member.

She and Jarvis both spoke about the need for the program being much higher than the 400 children it currently serves.

Several years ago, the organization [estimated 500 kids might not have access to healthy food on the weekends](#), now it’s believed the number is closer to 700, said Jarvis.

Skelton said she heard from one school principal who said “their families are choosing between putting food on the table and putting gas in the car to go to work.”

There are currently 20 kids on the wait-list.

“There is not actually a lot of movement off the list, because poverty is a long-term thing,” said Jarvis. “As soon as we have more space in the program, the spaces are filled very quickly.”

There is a triage process that aims to ensure the families with the greatest need get the next available spaces.

The program costs \$15 per child, per week, which means running it at its current capacity costs \$6,000 a week, said Jarvis.

And it's not just for weekends anymore.

"It became, if they have no food at weekends, what do they do on the holidays," Jarvis said.

For weeks like the March break, families receive grocery gift cards in the mail in the amount of \$15 per child.

"When it's a PD Day, we also pack extra," said Skelton.

The gift card solution came about during the pandemic, when school shutdowns made it impossible to deliver food.

"As soon as COVID started, the needs were so high. Come summertime, we said, we've got to continue," said Jarvis, explaining that support now continues year round.

Fundraising remains the biggest challenge, as the organization receives no government funding, she said.

Food drives are one way businesses and organizations sometimes help, but Jarvis says cash is king.

Just before the March break delivery, Food4Kids received a \$12,000 donation from 100 Women Who Care, whose members also volunteered to pack food.

They worked alongside a group from Halwell Mutual Insurance Company, which had sent a team of volunteers on Thursday morning.

Jarvis said it was a bonus to have not only the money, which will cover the costs of the program for two weeks, but also the volunteers.

"People feel good coming to do something like this," she said.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: *On the fifth anniversary of the Food4Kids pilot project, the Mercury Tribune wanted to find out how the program is doing and whether it is able to meet the demand.*

Jessica Lovell *is a reporter/photographer with the Guelph Mercury Tribune. She can be reached at jlovell@guelphmercurytribune.com.*