

HUNGRY IN LAMBTON



Tough Choices

The Independent presents a six-part series by Reporter Cathy Dobson and Photographer Glenn Ogilvie focused on the alarming number of rural Lambton residents who increasingly cannot afford to feed themselves and their families. Over the last nine months, we investigated how food insecurity is impacting our community and talked to the people who regularly access more than a dozen area food banks. We also examined the challenges faced by the extraordinary volunteers and agencies providing free food to a wide cross section of adults and children. Here are their stories.

An estimated 20,000 people in Lambton must decide between food and bills

Cathy Dobson
For The Independent

They arrive on foot, sometimes using their walkers or wheelchairs, and seem to come from every direction when the Salvation Army food truck rolls into the parking lot behind St. Paul's United Church in Petrolia.

Between 30 and 40 people are there twice a month to accept a free lunch from the food truck.

They are among an estimated 20,000 residents in Sarnia Lambton who do not have enough money and must decide between paying bills and buying food, says Krystal Thomson, the Salvation Army's manager of community and family services.

Survey results released this spring by the Lambton Health Unit confirm nearly 16 per cent – about 20,000 – living in Lambton are food insecure.

They are frequently local residents whose rent eats up much more than 30 per cent of their income. Lambton's critical shortage of affordable housing creates critical levels of food insecurity, according to the Nutritious Food Basket Report.

It's been a little more than a year since the Salvation Army received

a phone call from Lambton OPP who found people living rough in an area known as The Flats in Petrolia's Bridgeview Park.



Glenn Ogilvie Photo

Krystal Thomson and worker Jamie Thomson

"They saw homeless living in that wooded area and called us to bring out our food truck for them," said Thomson.

That's developed into a twice-monthly stop in Petrolia that not only provides meals but also creates connections so people who are couch-surfing, homeless or can't afford nutritious food, can be referred to other support services.

"If you are in need of a meal,

come get a meal, and we may be able to help you with emergency dental, rent and utility arrears, or hearing aids. There's a lot that we do at the Salvation Army that sometimes people don't know about," said Thomson.

No questions are asked, a point that one woman stressed is very important to her and others who go there.

"This place is wonderful," she said. She also gets food virtually every day from the Petrolia Community Refrigerator, which is located behind St. Paul's Church on Petrolia's main street.

"I honestly don't know where I'd be without it and I hear a lot of people say the same thing," said the 60 year-old woman who preferred not to give her name.

For almost three years, she's relied on the Petrolia Food Bank, the Refrigerator program and the Salvation Army food truck.

She's grateful but she's also ashamed.

"I feel embarrassed," she said. "People look at you and think, oh, she's on welfare and they look down on you."

Accepting food is hard for her after working a physical job for more than 20 years and not accepting charity most of her life.



Glenn Ogilvie Photo

Heather Wilson visits the Salvation Army Food Truck

But arthritis is crippling her and work is impossible now, she said.

"The cost of living is so high and I only have ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program). It's not like I have anything to pay for food."

Another Petrolia woman, Heather Wilson, says she regularly visits the food truck and gets groceries from the Refrigerator. Wilson is a friendly woman with a direct gaze and a big smile.

"I was born with a learning disability and I don't work anymore. I come here and I talk to

some really nice people and get whatever I need," she said.

There was a time that Wilson worked at Tim Hortons. Later she was a sidewalk cleaner. But living with a learning disability her entire life has limited her opportunities.

ODSP pays her \$1,000 a month, she said. The cost of living has significantly jumped in the last year. If one thing goes wrong – like the time her refrigerator broke down – Wilson has no money at all for food.

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Glenn Ogilvie Photo

People of all ages use Petrolia's Community Refrigerator to meet their food needs once the bills are paid

'A matter of humanity to provide food'

Single men and women, couples, older folks, and a growing number of families with children, access both the food truck and the Petrolia Community Refrigerator. Food insecurity is directly tied to a lack of affordable housing in Lambton, said the Salvation Army's Brad Webster.

"The ask is more than we have right now," he said. "The need is a lot higher than the donations and unfortunately that limits what we're able to do."

Demand has also shot up for the Petrolia Community Refrigerator program that operates from an insulated shed next to the church and is part of St. Paul's outreach.

As many as 50 people a day get meat, produce and canned items from the unique program initiated in 2021 by Larry Leckie.

Leckie and his volunteer team have started an aggressive food rescue program that collected nearly 13 tonnes (28,000 pounds) of food last year from overturned trucks and local grocery stores.

Rescued food can range from anything from fresh fruit, nearly expired meat, bread, and even frozen seafood.

Heidi's Your Independent Grocer in Petrolia plays a big role in providing the Refrigerator with recovered food, Leckie said.

"Heidi (Soudant) started to freeze the meat for us. That's made a big difference," he said.

Besides food rescue, many food drives,

individuals and groups donate food to the program, which is getting more use by the month.

"We started with a trailer in the parking lot and I figured maybe five or six people would use it," said Leckie. "But, oh man, it started and it never stopped. Once the word spread, people came from all over."

Numerous agencies also collect food and meals from the Refrigerator and deliver them to clients in need. On the day of our interview, a box of food was requested by a Victim Services worker who was assisting in a domestic violence situation.

"So you'll see people in some very nice cars drive up and get food," Leckie said. "It is often the Red Cross or a caseworker of some kind."

"We have people who see the nice cars and question what's going on. But you don't know the story, so it's important not to judge."

Before retiring, Leckie was a supervisor in transportation logistics and is skilled with statistics and co-ordinating the PCR's team of 43 volunteers, says board member Ruth Syer.

He's the one who tracked the 27,512 meals made with rescued food last year and calculated that feeding people, rather than throwing that food out, diverted 125 tons of greenhouse gas from the landfill – another interesting aspect of the work they do.

Syer is also the founder of Ruth's Place,



Glenn Ogilvie Photo

Ruth Syer, left, and Larry Leckie keep the Petrolia Community Refrigerator stocked

which teaches life skills - including cooking - to people with developmental challenges. They frequently use the rescued food to make meals that are available free to PCR clients.

Demand will only grow this year as the cost of living rises, say Syer and Leckie.

"Food is up five per cent this year and

last year it was up 10 per cent," he said. "I've had people say we are attracting the homeless because of the refrigerator. But homelessness is a result of the economy."

"When people are marginalized, when they lose their jobs, they lose their house... It becomes a matter of humanity to provide food where we can."



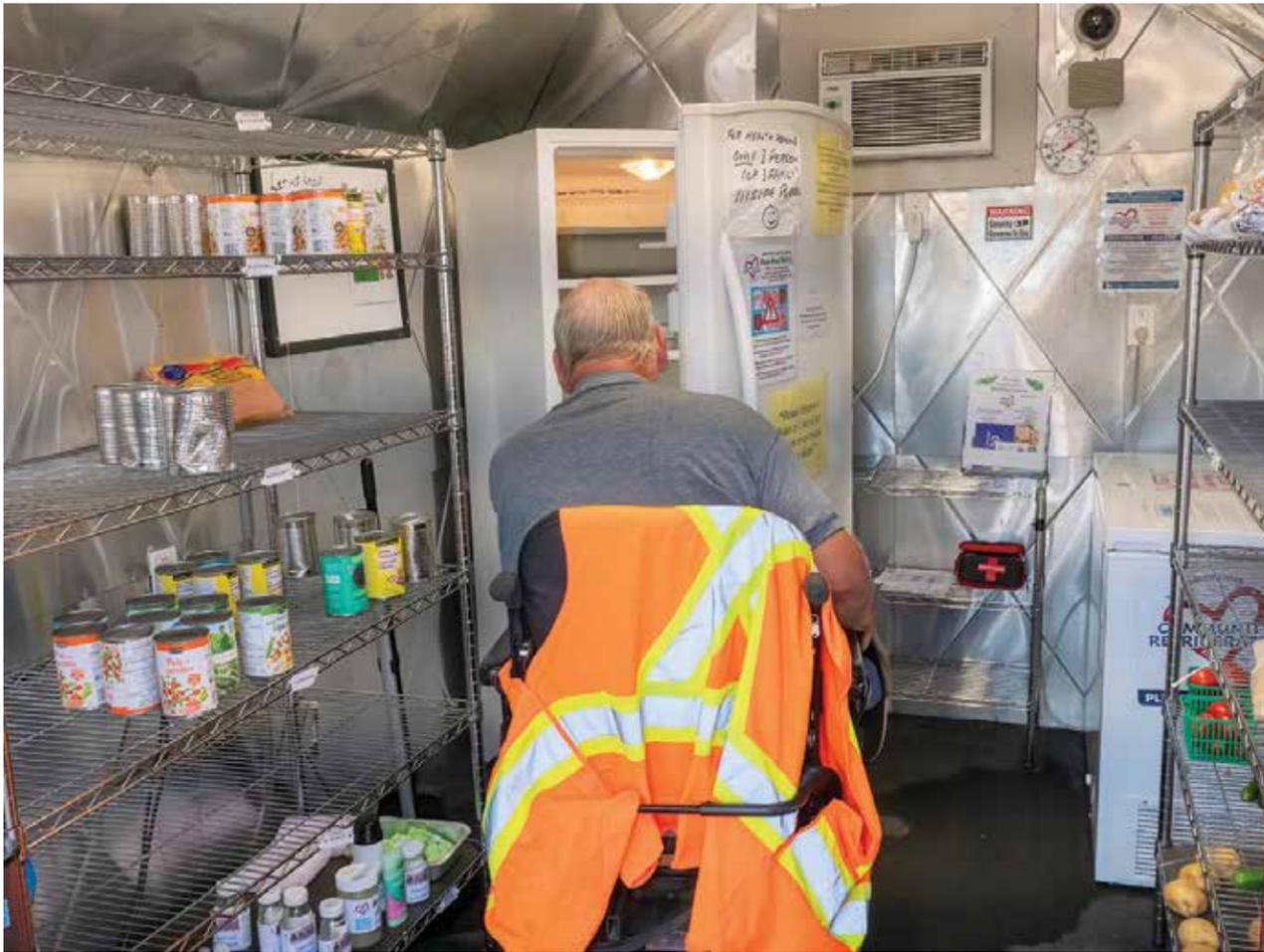
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Steve Esseltine looks through the refrigerator in Petrolia

Former horseman finds a place but feels 'lost in the system'

Cathy Dobson
For The Independent

Steve Esseltine lost his right leg in 2017 when a horse fell on him and crushed it. Four years later, his left leg was ravaged by diabetes and amputated as well. After recuperating in hospital, Esseltine was moved to a nursing home in London for rehab. "It was great there. I liked it," explains the 61-year-old who trained horses for 40 years before losing his legs. "But at the nursing home, they told me my time there was over and they put me out, just told me I had to leave and pushed me out into the cold in a wheelchair." That's when his doctor came to his rescue, says Esseltine. "The doctor knew I had gone to a mall that day. I didn't know where else to go," he said. "It was the doctor who called the police. He told them I would harm myself. "It wasn't true, but it gave the police a reason to take me to the hospital and I stayed there until spring came." Even with that extra time to look, Esseltine said he could not find a place to live that would accommodate a double amputee whose only income comes from Ontario's Disability Supplement Program. "All kinds of people tried helping me, but there was nothing."

The Salvation Army in London finally gave him a room at their homeless shelter where he says he paid \$700 a month. It was a roof over his head but he didn't want to stay. "Everyone was doing drugs," Esseltine said. While there, he became friends with a woman who also wanted to leave. So when an old friend from his horse training days, offered Esseltine and his girlfriend space to live in a garage, they took it. It meant moving to a property just outside Petrolia, an area new to Esseltine. He said he is grateful for it, especially since the owner has horses and Steve loves to be around them again. But there is no hot water and it's not insulated for winter. When we met Esseltine, he said he was working with a Lambton County social services worker to find an apartment in Petrolia. We met him at the Petrolia Community Refrigerator beside St. Paul's Church on the main street. "I come into town a couple of times a day in my electric wheelchair just for something to do," he said. If he needs groceries, he picks them up for free at the community refrigerator, which is usually well-stocked. Recently, his diabetes became a serious problem, mostly because he didn't have access to a doctor or insulin. "I went to the ER and got help," he said. "I don't want a lot. I just want a doctor and I



Glenn Ogilvie Photo

Steve Esseltine likes Petrolia however his housing situation is uncertain can't find one." But clearly he also needs adequate housing. He'd like to live in Petrolia. He finds it a safe and friendly place. However, his social worker is gathering the paperwork for an application for housing in Thedford. First, he has to get some photo ID. Everything takes a lot of time. "The government got me this electric chair," said Esseltine. "And it is really great. "But I've been looking for housing for two to three years. They said they'd put me at the top of the list, but still, there's nothing. "I feel lost in the system."

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Glenn Ogilvie Photo

Brenda Hart's health keeps her from working

Stigma around who uses food banks isn't fair, says grandma

Cathy Dobson
For The Independent

Brenda Hart wishes she could work. At age 49, her spirit is willing but her body is not. No doubt, a paycheque would help put food on the table for her two adult children and two grandchildren who live with her, but she has been unable to work since 2011. "I worked retail until my health got so bad I had to go on permanent disability," she says while taking a few items from the Petrolia Community Refrigerator. These are challenging times, Hart says, readily agreeing to talk about her family's dependency on food banks and Petrolia's Community Refrigerator. There's a stigma that needs addressing, she says. Hart has painful neuropathy in her hands and feet. Her 28-year-old son has a learning disability that keeps him from holding down a job. Her daughter, 24, just had a baby and won't be in a position to work for a while yet. They all live together in a two-bedroom house in Sarnia where the rent is \$2,100 a month. Since the Hart's doctor is in Petrolia, they stop at the Community Refrigerator whenever they have an appointment. Hart says they only take what they need and sometimes give back when the food bank gives them items they don't generally consume. The day we meet her, she's there when the Salvation Army food truck has pulled up alongside the Refrigerator. For the first time, the family gratefully accepts some prepared meals to go. "The Refrigerator program is great," says Hart. "We're here once every month or two when we see the doctor and we really like that there's no big lineup or wait." Today was her three-day-old grandson's

first check-up. He sleeps quietly in his car seat next to his mom while his grandmother collects the food. Making ends meet has been much more difficult since Hart's fiancé died a few months ago. He worked full time as a mechanic but passed away suddenly in January from an embolism. Hart says his death means she increasingly relies on community food banks and the Petrolia Community Refrigerator to ensure everyone eats. "With my fiancé's income, it was okay. But I have a full house and it's not easy now," she said. She feels judged by some people who don't understand the challenges faced by her family. "It's like they say we're too lazy and don't want to work, but I wish I could," she said. "I enjoyed working when I could. I do see people who can work and don't, and here I want to." She says she tried pizza delivery thinking it would get her off her feet more than working as a cashier. The money was good but repeatedly getting in and out of a vehicle became physically too much and she had to give it up. Now she is collecting \$1,100 a month from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). That leaves her \$1,000 short on her rent and unable to pay for utilities, gas or groceries. Her children pitch in with their social assistance but it's still not enough. "So they force people to live together to try to make ends meet," said Hart. "And it's only a two-bedroom house, not a giant place, you know. "So why isn't the government increasing ODSP?" she asked. This year, her visits to the food bank and the Community Refrigerator are becoming more frequent.



Glenn Ogilvie Photo

Hart's says there should be no shame in looking for help when people are short of food.

"I'll just pop in here and see what they have. If I don't see anything I need, I leave it for the next person. She sounds cheerful and she's clearly delighted by the new baby. But losing her fiancé has been difficult both emotionally and financially. "Paying the bills will be hard, at least until the lease is up, but honestly, I don't think we'll find anything cheaper. "It's a struggle for everybody."

Next Week in **The Independent's** six-part series **Hungry in Lambton** from Reporter Cathy Dobson and Photographer Glenn Ogilvie read how a rural foodbank meets surprising demand and the stories of the people who depend on it.