

Rise in food bank usage a reflection of policy failures

Originally conceived as a temporary measure to help people cope through an economic downturn, food banks are now a fixture in communities nationwide, including our own.

Worse still, they're fixtures seeing a soaring demand that has the feel of permanency.

"We continue to see record-breaking numbers every month. And record-breaking numbers are not a good thing in our industry," says Kim Wilhelm, CEO of The Food Bank of Waterloo Region.

"What would be perfect is if the need for food assistance went away completely, which meant that people have the supports that they need. That is, unfortunately, the opposite to what we are seeing."

Demand for food assistance last quarter, for example, was up by 20 per cent from a year earlier. That means one in 10 households in the region struggle with food security.

Last year, The Community Food Assistance Network – some 120 community programs, including those by Woolwich Community Services and the Wellesley Food Cupboard – support almost 59,000 individuals in need.

That list includes more than 20,000 children in the region who live in food-insecure households, Wilhelm notes. That's the impetus for the annual "Full Bellies. Happy Hearts." campaign that kicked off this week with the goal of raising 1.5 million meals for children and families.

The timing is intentional, as the agency looks to ensure that kids who may benefit from nutritional programs at school continue to have support



when they get out of the classroom for the summer. "During the school year, many of these kids rely on school nutrition programs for meals. But when school ends for the summer, these programs stop too, leaving many kids without access to the food they need."

People in the region continue to support food bank programs, says Wilhelm, but agencies will be monitoring to see donations can keep pace with accelerated demand. Any gaps will be problematic.

While food drives are often associated with Thanksgiving and Christmas, demand is a year-round thing. That mean's donations of food items

are needed at all times. Ditto for cash, which helps agencies buy perishables and the like.

As the demand for food assistance grows in conjunction with a drop in the standard of living and rising food prices, there's every reason to fear there'll be a gap between giving and what's needed to help feed those in need.

Concerns about the escalating cost of living and stagnating incomes are at the heart of the matter.

When food banks got underway – the world's first opened in Phoenix, Arizona in 1967, with the first Canadian operation appearing in Edmonton in 1981 – they were seen as a way to help during a temporary downturn in the economy. Since that time, they've become permanent resources used by more and more

people. And not just those on social assistance, for instance, but increasingly by those where one or more people in the household have jobs.

In Waterloo Region, 2,151 of the 17,878 unique households that received support in the last quarter were employed, a 16 per cent jump over a year earlier. That segment edged out households receiving Ontario Works (2,140) and those receiving Ontario Disability Support Program funds (2,020).

"There are a number of those that we know are going to continue to need food assistance – so, folks who are government support, because government supports are simply not adequate – but what's been happening even before we started to see this increase in the cost of living... is that so many people who are working,

but they still can't get by. Some people we hear from are working two, three jobs, trying to make ends meet," says Wilhelm.

"We don't have anything to measure this against right now. We've never experienced this demand on things before. It's unprecedented."

"We were started as a temporary measure, and here we are 40 years later seeing the highest demand ever. Not so temporary anymore."

The "temporary" relief provided by food banks has become entrenched. So, too, have the underlying reasons for the growing demand: stagnating wages losing pace with the cost of living, particularly housing.

While governments are busy mouthing platitudes about constructing more homes, current growth rates make it impossible

to build our way out of the shortfalls, let alone build so much housing that it drives down prices.

Affordable housing in the form of subsidized housing – also lagging well behind demand, with no end in sight – will always be necessary for those most in need, but for the average person facing huge rent increases and the prospect of never owning a home, the word "affordable" means something different. And something that current government policies will never address.

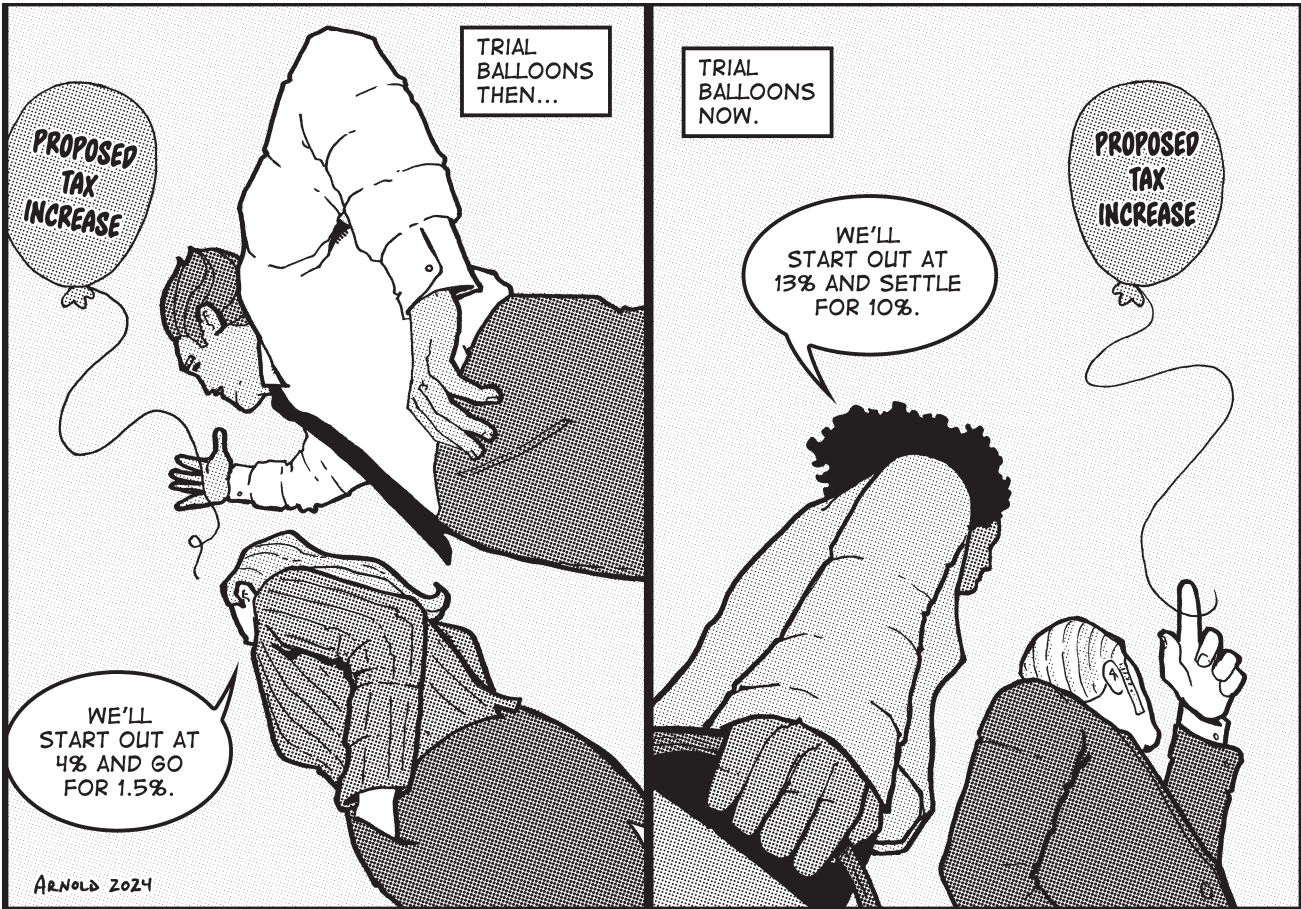
Housing is a key driver of our current economic woes. The standard of living has been under assault for decades, and today's environment – also made worse by poor government policies – makes it even more difficult for people in Ontario to stretch their already stretched income any further to afford their basic necessities, let alone get ahead.

Those woes can be seen in Food Bank Canada's 2024 Poverty Report Card, in which Ontario is given a D-, which was a common grade across the country, with the exception of BC (D+), Quebec (C+) and PEI (C-).

On the affordability of housing – defined as people spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing – Ontario gets an F. More than 45 per cent of the population deals with higher housing costs than that target.

With a lack of "action on affordable housing or expanding social services and programs, people in the province continue to see worsening conditions in 2024. This is concerning as the province is home to a significant portion of low-income

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Local politicians and bureaucrats are already talking about yet another round of massive tax hikes, lead balloons be damned.

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