

Response to Elaine Power's article in the Globe & Mail.

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Dear Editor

While on a purely theoretical basis, Elaine Power has some good points to make, income is a continuum and the solutions to low income/poverty are also on a continuum. To say we need to close food banks to draw attention to poverty and get government to act is sort of like saying we'll close down pharmacies until we cure disease. Poverty, like disease, is a complex issue. Food banks are but one small, but important, remedial action – like Good Food Boxes, Breakfast for Kids, community kitchens, community gardens, Goodwill. Then we could move on to the free dental clinics, homeless shelters, Ontario Works, ODSP – because in their own way they also “shelter us from the harsh reality that millions lack the basic necessities of life.”

Her statement that “Food banks have had 25 years to end hunger. Instead demand continues to grow. It is time to stop applying a solution that isn't working.” assumes that we are all short-sighted enough to believe that food banks are the deciding factor in whether or not someone is impoverished. Food banks are remedial. Not preventative. No one gave food banks the mandate to end poverty or hunger while we all sit back and wait.

She believes that food banks essentially keep governments, businesses and community members from taking responsibility. That they feel like they've helped the problem, that it's taken care of, so they move on to other things. There is some truth in this, in that people need to be educated. When SIRCH Community Services started raising profile about poverty in Haliburton County a few years ago, I can't count the number of people who said “I had no idea!” And they wanted to help. And they were willing to have the conversation. And I know that many people brought up the issue of poverty in the subsequent elections. Closing the food banks would probably put pressure on our municipal, provincial and federal governments to do something about hunger and poverty, but what happens to the families and kids in the meantime? In the months and years the issue is debated by politicians? And what do we say to the people who, in the interim, want to help – “sorry, that's the responsibility of the government and we need to keep the pressure on so we don't want you to do anything right now.” I don't think so.

We are all responsible for our neighbours and community members. Not just government, although I am strongly in favour of everyone having a standard of living that is adequate for health and well-being. But meanwhile, if we can ensure kids aren't hungry, that seniors have the medication they need, that adults get relief from poison generated from rotting teeth, that families have warm clothing, that pregnant women have nutritious food, then we've created a better place to live for all of us I think. Taking away one option for people to get basic necessities should never be justified as a political weapon.

Having said that, we should never cease our efforts to de-stigmatize poverty, to strengthen social solidarity and social cohesion, to eliminate the “us and them” so it's just “us” and “we.”

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