

Beyond Housing lives up to its name with new freezer program



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Residents of a Beyond Housing building in Kitchener that received freezers: Back Row: Alfred, Shirley (volunteer)

Front row: Angelica, Grace and Benda. [Bill Atwood]

Although inflation has slowed down somewhat to 3.1 per cent, many Canadians like Brenda Kumornik are still feeling the pinch.

“A little bag used to be 10 bucks a bag and it’s \$20 to \$30 per bag of groceries now. That’s not even just food, that’s toiletries, as well and it’s outrageous out there right now. It’s ridiculous. I don’t even have a pet anymore because I can’t afford it,” Kumornik said.

It is for that reason that Shirley Lichti, a volunteer with the Elmira-based non-profit Beyond Housing, was motivated to create a program to provide freezers to 18 residents of the apartment building where Kumornik lives in Kitchener.

Lichti has been a volunteer with the organization for a number of years, including using her marketing experience to help it rebrand from its former name, MennoHomes.

However she was looking to do more when she learned about a program in the UK run by the housing association Clarion Housing which provided freezers to 30 households on a trial basis.

“I’m very interested in affordable housing because there’s clearly a huge huge need for it in our community....And I realized that there was an opportunity for me to help them in other ways,” Lichti said.

Lichti teamed up with several people to run the project, including Danby Appliances in Guelph which provided 10 freezers free of charge and eight more at a discounted rate. Additionally, the Ayr Foodland store donated groceries, and Jody O’Malley and Kirstie Herbstreit of The Culinary Studio donated their time to teach 12 cooking classes to the group over a six-month period.

“I was absolutely gobsmacked at how willing people were to step up to it. So then it just fell to me to do the organizing,” Lichti said.

Along with teaching new cooking skills and reducing their food wastes, participants saw a 32 per cent decrease in their food costs. Others reported improvements in their health, including one participant that was better able to manage their diabetes.

Inflation made the freezers and the cooking classes even more important, resident Grace Cameron said.

“Prices are unbelievable at the grocery store right now. And when you learn how to use what you have in your cupboards, it brings the whole grocery shopping thing to a whole different level,” Cameron explained.

“With the freezers we can buy stuff on sale and put it in the freezers,” Kumornik added.

Since receiving the freezer, Cameron has stocked up on meat from Nurtifarm, making it easier for her to plan ahead.

“They filled my freezer with all kinds of meat, pretty much anything I wanted and I don’t have to run to the store. I’m not running every couple of days to buy my next few meals because I know in advance. I know I’ve got meals in the freezer that I don’t have to run to the store for,” she said.

Dan Driedger, executive director of Beyond Housing, said the results were similar to what they were expecting would happen. This is a type of program that fits in with what they are trying to do besides just providing an affordable place to stay.

“That’s a perfect example of going beyond simply providing housing, so it fits very nicely with the sort of new creative initiatives that we were hoping to do. We tried to support our tenants in a variety of ways, and this fit very nicely, checked a number of boxes in terms of some of the criteria, so we were quite excited to be involved,” Driedger said.

The next step is to examine the data and determine whether it would work to run the program at another Beyond Housing building with different demographics.

“We’re going to want to sit down with the donors that supported it... to see what their level of interest is in doing this in other locations. We want to dig into the details a little bit more before just saying automatically ‘Yes, this is great.’ Now we’re going to roll this out in every location, I think it needs to be tailored, but there’s certainly some good stuff that can be learned there,” Driedger said.

Lichti is hoping for the program to grow in other locations across Canada, even if she can’t be directly involved.

“Clearly, I can’t be involved if they run in some little town in southern Alberta because it requires somebody who is actually physically there to pick up the ingredients to pack them into two ingredient bags for every participant, to deliver them out, to keep running the program. I am more than willing to be involved. I documented everything. I’m more than willing to share all those learnings,” she said.