

Just Friends Food Bank Stanley, New Brunswick

<https://www.justfriendsfoodbank.com/>



The challenges of operating a food bank in a rural food desert* with no public transportation

**A food desert is an area where access to affordable, healthy food is restricted because residents do not have a grocery store within a convenient travelling distance.*

Geographic Overview:

- Our food bank is located 45km from the nearest grocery store, bank, laundromat, government office, etc. (nearest services in Fredericton, NB)
- Some of our remote clients have to drive up to 65km to reach these services
- Our clients in our more remote areas travel quite a distance just to reach us: Napadogan (25km), McGivney (28km), Taymouth (25km), Hamtown Corner (24km)
- There is no public transportation of any sort operating in our coverage area
- Gas prices have a direct and significant impact on the financial well being of rural residents

Food Security:

- Our food bank and our clients rely heavily on non-perishable food items. By using this strategy, we can stock-pile many pantry staples when they are available at their best prices. While some food banks are focussed on providing as many fresh foods as possible, we must also focus on providing our clients with a robust box of standard, shelf-stable items because frequent trips to the nearest grocery store are not possible
- We fully utilize our walk-in freezer and commercial fridges
- The Stanley Community Food Smart Program is a bulk food buying club operating from our community resource centre. This program is open to everyone and members buy a bag of fresh produce for \$15. Deliveries are once/month
- Some clients have their own gardens
- In partnership with Stanley Consolidated (K-12) School, we provide a lot of support to students and families struggling with food insecurity

Clientele:

- Many clients struggle with physical and/or mental illness. Some illnesses are visible; many are not
- Some clients struggle with low literacy and low numeracy skills, often affecting their ability to cope and solve problems
- Precarious forms of work are common. These jobs have low wages with few or no benefits, an irregular work schedule, and minimal job security.
- Many clients do not own a vehicle, and for those who do, it is a financial struggle to keep car insurance, renew their drivers licence, and keep their vehicle repaired and inspected so it can legally be on the road
- Some clients access our food bank regularly; some clients reach out for food only when they absolutely need it. They may go several months without needing help, and they may only reach out when some catastrophic event has broken their budget (illness, loss of income, childcare issues, costly repairs to vehicle or home, etc)

Communication challenges that affect our ability to connect with our clients:

- Not every client has a home phone. Many clients have a cell phone and they rely on pre-paid phone cards. However, if they run out of pre-paid minutes, they may not have money to buy another card
- Clients may live in an area with no cell service, meaning they have to drive elsewhere to actually make a phone call
- Most people have a device to access the internet, but they may not have internet access at their home. They rely on open wifi networks like ours for internet, and because their access is sporadic, we often can't reach them in a timely manner

Rural Internet:

- Rural internet is expensive and very limited. Most of our territory is served ONLY by Xplore (\$99/month) and Starlink (\$950 up front and \$160/month), making internet access unaffordable for many households
- Why do we care? *"No matter where you live, access to reliable, affordable high-speed Internet is essential. Connecting with loved ones, operating a business, working remotely and accessing vital services, like health care and education, requires a fast, dependable Internet connection."* (Government of Canada, December 2022)

Housing Crisis:

- There is a shortage of safe, affordable housing in our area. This was even more evident during the pandemic when local real estate began selling quickly at never-before-seen prices and people who were renting rough accommodations were suddenly forced to move
- There are people in our area whose living arrangements are not always safe. Sometimes they are forced to "couch surf" with friends and family and sometimes they sleep in their vehicles
- There are people in our area living "off grid" because they can't afford electricity. They don't have a fridge to keep perishable food and they have limited ability to cook.
- There are people in our area who live in campers or camps that are not winterized
- There are people in our area who live without running water
- With food insecurity and homelessness growing in NB, food bank services are an essential tool in keeping people "homed", even in the most humble conditions

Because we have community members living in very isolated conditions, we saw that there was a need for so much more than just food. Our vision was to operate both a food bank AND a community resource centre. We offer a broad range of programs and services and we are careful to ensure that we are not duplicating any services already being offered in our community. Whenever we can, we partner with other service groups in our community because we know that together we are stronger.

A full list of our programs and services is kept up-to-date on our website:

<https://www.justfriendsfoodbank.com/>

Related articles/resources:

Are you living in a food desert in New Brunswick? (NB Media Co-op, July 2020)

<https://nbmediacoop.org/2020/07/09/are-you-living-in-a-food-desert-in-new-brunswick/>

Inaccessible, unreliable, unaffordable: The struggle to get internet in rural Canada (National Post, December 2022)

<https://nationalpost.com/feature/left-behind-internet-access-rural-canada>

High speed Internet for all Canadians (ISED Canada, December 2022)

<https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/high-speed-internet-canada/en/high-speed-internet-all-canada>

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