

Mini neighbourhood pantries offer food and dignity for those struggling to afford basics

ZOSIA BIELSKI >

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

UPDATED 11 HOURS AGO



A pair of youth walk past the Little Free Pantry in Nobleford, Alta. on Nov. 25.

IAN MARTENS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

They perch on people's front lawns, outside libraries, in parks and by duck ponds. They're colourful, crafted like tiny homes on stilts, or retrofitted from discarded newspaper boxes or kitchen cabinets.

Miniature pantries stocked with free food and essential toiletries dot neighbourhoods across the country, thanks to good Samaritans who build, maintain and replenish these boxes for the benefit of those struggling to afford the basics. The mini pantry movement gained speed throughout the pandemic, when opportunities to volunteer grew slimmer during lockdowns. Now, as Canadians face record-high food inflation, neighbourhood pantries – and their philosophy of “take what you need, give what you can” – feel even more relevant.

Some 5.8 million Canadians – or 15.9 per cent of the country – worried about running out of food, bought fewer groceries or missed meals last year, according to Statistics Canada. Food bank visits were up 35 per cent this past March from prepandemic levels, according to a Food Banks Canada report. Food costs are set to rise by another 5 to 7 per cent in 2023, according to Canada’s Food Price Report.

While little pantries aren’t meant to solve the root causes of hunger – inadequate wages and a lack of affordable housing among them – they aim to dispel shame around poverty and build trust in communities. Operating independently of one another, pantry stewards keep their boxes stocked with the help of neighbours, passersby and local business owners, who contribute goods, too. Speaking with The Globe and Mail, pantry keepers across Canada shared what they’ve learned about their neighbourhoods through this type of giving.



Joe Hutter, chief administrative officer for the Town of Nobleford, left, and Kaitlynn Weaver, outreach services supervisor for Family and Community Support Services.

IAN MARTENS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The robin's egg blue "pantry of hope" sits in a park in Nobleford, a town of just over 1,400 in Alberta. It was dreamt up by kids 11 to 13 years old this past spring as they grew worried about hunger in their community.

"When it was first built, they would come to programming and be like, 'We built that!' or, 'That's our pantry!' They're really invested in the project," said Kaitlynn Weaver, outreach services supervisor at Family & Community Support Services, which runs a youth program where the children hatched their idea.

In June, they ran a food drive for their pantry, going door to door dropping off empty bags to be filled with goods. What they collected is now stored at a local community centre; the kids ferry supplies to their little blue box in a wagon.

The pantry's central location is key. The nearest food bank is 25 minutes away in the rural community, the distance proving a challenge for some struggling with gas prices and those without a car, Ms. Weaver said.

Townpeople were aghast when the pantry fell victim to vandalism during its first days in the park. Someone had torn the door off, taken out a donated tube of toothpaste and smeared the box with minty goo.

"The entire town was up in arms over it," said Joseph Hutter, Nobleford's chief administrative officer who helped get the project into the park. "It was like someone got personally attacked."

Locals quickly repaired the pantry, which has remained intact since. "It's part of the community now," Mr. Hutter said. "It reminds people to be more compassionate and neighbourly."

As lockdowns brought life to a standstill in Winnipeg in the winter of 2020, Marlies Roziere noticed the way a tiny free library outside her neighbour's house became a "community booster."

Feeling motivated, the retired elementary school teacher organized two free food pantries in the fall of 2021. Friends built the boxes for her and placed them outside a couple of local churches in areas of need, and close to bus routes.

One pantry sits outside Winnipeg's Big Red Church, where Ms. Roziere is a community member. Church staff take a moment during Sunday service to gently remind parishioners to donate goods. With grocery prices still painfully high, the pantry is emptied quickly. "There is nothing that doesn't move," said Ms. Roziere, who helps refill this particular box every week or two.

She thinks the pantry movement offers dignity. "It doesn't instill shame. You can just walk by there and grab something. You can even go at night." She added: "I like this grassroots thing. I'm not a big huge organizer."

On summer nights, she might leave bananas. For winter's frigid blast, she puts out coffee, tea, macaroni and hot dogs: "They can take the freezing." At Christmas, she likes setting out cake and biscuit mixes, including eggs and oil, measured out for specific recipes.

She watched one day as a woman placed something bulky into the pantry and walked away. "I looked in the box and she had put a loaf of freshly baked bread in there. Maybe she didn't have tons herself but she could make a loaf of bread."



Alana Tollenaar, a birding store owner in Spruce Grove, west of Edmonton, made her pantry from an abandoned box that used to carry real estate magazines.

HANDOUT

For her little pantry, Alana Tollenaar repurposed an abandoned box originally intended for real estate magazines. Shaped like a bright yellow house, it sits outside her bird feeding store in Spruce Grove, Alta.

Ms. Tollenaar spends between \$200 and \$300 a month to stock her pantry, nearly double what it cost before inflation set in. She offers customers store discounts in exchange for helping load up the pantry, which gets emptied nightly.

Ramen noodles, crackers and snack kits go fastest, as do soap and shampoo. Once a week, a neighbour brings leftover bread and buns from a bakery. Another neighbour practising her knitting skills donates all her hats and mittens.

Ms. Tollenaar studied food insecurity at the University of Alberta. She learned some Canadians without fixed addresses are denied access to food banks. That's when little free pantries came up as a small-scale way to help. "You don't have to fill out any application to access them. They're available freely, all the time," she said.

An elderly woman without a home stops by her pantry often. "She doesn't have any teeth so it's hard for her to eat any kind of hard food. I put in pudding and apple sauce for her. The other one she loves is apple pie filling." Recently, a man came by to collect food for five people camping out nearby.

"People ask us all the time, 'Well what if someone comes and cleans out the whole pantry?'" Ms. Tollenaar said. "My philosophy is, if someone needs all the stuff I put out, I'm glad it was there for them."



Rachel Buxton set up a pantry using discarded kitchen cabinets, with her son Sully, 5, in Ottawa, seen here in July, 2021.

HANDOUT

Last summer, Rachel Buxton and her five-year-old son, Sullivan, dug an old kitchen cabinet out of someone's trash, giving it a second life as a mini pantry in their Ottawa neighbourhood, which straddles wealth and poverty.

“With the pandemic, things really took a nosedive. People were really desperate in their need,” said Ms. Buxton, a professor in environmental sciences at Carleton University.

A community liaison made a list of items not readily found at local food banks. Ms. Buxton printed out the list on the pantry door to help guide would-be donors. It includes toiletries but also “fun things like cookies,” Ms. Buxton said. During a recent grocery run, Sullivan picked Oreos for the box.

Sitting out in the elements, the kitchen cabinet slowly rotted and caved in on itself. It’s now been replaced by a small garden shed, with more room for warm winter clothing donated by neighbours. “We’re expanding,” Ms. Buxton said.

The family’s living room window looks out onto the pantry. People visit at night, their belongings carried in shopping carts.

“The people taking are very much in need,” Ms. Buxton said. “What I’m hoping is that it makes people feel welcome, that they’re our neighbours and that we want to share what we have.”

Alexis Rudderham and her friends have persuaded legions of neighbours, grocers, farmers and restaurateurs in Sydney, N.S., to help keep one popular pantry full.

A café donated macaroni pot pies one week, lobster mac-and-cheese pot pies another. This winter, local businesses will give \$200 a week for one month, with seniors at local Rotary Clubs dispatched to grocery stores to stock the pantry with the funds.

The pantry in question appeared in town mere days into the pandemic, attached to a large, old, maple tree near a community organization. Nobody knew who put it there; eventually it was revealed to be a quiet local contractor. A Facebook group sprung up to co-ordinate grocery errands, cleanups and fixes. The pantry has since been moved off the tree and refurbished with a fridge and red roof.

It needs constant maintenance, with critters, open and expired food, and frost-cracked bags of lentils to contend with – pulses go slowly. Salt, pepper, sugar and peanut butter go faster, as do toiletries and garbage bags.

One day, a member of the group found someone had “butchered open a can of soup,” eating it cold on the sidewalk. So they started stocking more ready-to-eat foods. After Ms. Rudderham saw a child check the box after school, she started leaving mandarin oranges and granola bars.

“There’s never enough food,” said Ms. Rudderham, adding the need has risen sharply in recent months.

Throughout the effort, she has witnessed desperation up close. Some people have taken items from the pantry and tried to return them to grocery stores for cash. The group contemplated locking up the box at night or asking people to register. But it felt antithetical to the little free pantry philosophy of anonymity, dignity and trust.

“You don’t have to disclose who you are, or your need. You don’t have to disclose anything,” Ms. Rudderham said. “You just walk up and open the door.”