

## **Yorkton Stories**

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## **Food security and 15 tons of potatoes**

*Published 18 October 2025*

### **Dick DeRyk**

In the summer and fall of 2025, several factors came together, one of them out of the blue, to tackle and do more about hunger and food insecurity in Yorkton. The first was in early summer when the city of Yorkton hired what they call a barriers to access co-ordinator, someone who was tasked with helping to set up local committees to address various barriers in the community. There was already a social housing committee dealing with homelessness and housing, but other needs and opportunities were identified, including food security.

That led to the food security committee holding its first meeting in early summer. The five member organizations were already working on the problem of hunger in Yorkton and area, and got together to see if more could be done as a group, than each could achieve individually. Members of the committee are representatives of the Salvation Army Food Bank, the homeless shelter and kitchen Bruno's Place, St. Andrew's United Church Food Shelf, the Love Bus, and the Yorkton Community Fridge, about which we talked with organizers on a podcast published in November of 2023.

The stated intent in a letter that was distributed to businesses and organizations in the city is to identify needs, develop strategies to address those needs, strengthen existing support systems already in place, and then put solutions in place. The group intends to expand co-ordination among those already dealing with the problem of hunger, do advocacy and education when and where required, and share resources.

"In the coming months," the letter states, "We will be engaging with the community to educate, listen, learn, and work together on initiatives that make a lasting impact."

Essentially they intend to avoid creating or perpetuating silos where everyone does their own thing with somewhat limited co-ordination. To date, efforts have focused on recruiting partner agencies, setting goals, understanding roles, and developing supporting documents. Even at this early stage, partner agencies have improved interagency understanding and resource sharing.

For instance, if the Love Bus has extra food bags at the end of the night they drop off at Community Fridge. If the Salvation Army Food Bank has excess or items that will expire before they are open again, they contact partners to redistribute and try to reduce waste.

If one group receives a donation or inquiry about donating things that they don't deal with, they divert it to another group if possible. If someone's needs can't be met by one group, they refer that person to another - not just committee partners, but all food services in Yorkton.

The introductory letter we referred to, which includes information about the partner agencies and which can be read on our website, was sent to local businesses, community groups, and others dealing with or interested in tackling food insecurity.

The committee is also looking to develop new food resources or improve existing ones to better serve the community. That has included, for instance, discussion about a second community fridge in a different area of the city.

What was definitely not anticipated by the group as it was getting its feet wet, was an email received by the Community Fridge on August 13, 2025. The email came from Second Harvest, a national food rescue and redistribution organization with headquarters in Etobicoke, Ontario, that has been around since 1985. Its vision is simply, No Waste. No Hunger. Its goal is to keep food where it belongs: on plates and out of landfills.

On its website, [SecondHarvest.ca](https://SecondHarvest.ca), the organization minces no words. It bluntly tells us that nearly one in four people in Canada don't know where their next meal is coming from. At the same time, 46.5 percent of all food in Canada is wasted every year. And almost half of that wasted food could be redirected to support Canadians who don't have enough. Doing that has another benefit besides alleviating hunger: it would eliminate 124.5 billion pounds of greenhouse gases that are created every year from wasted food, the same as would be produced by 17.3 million vehicles.

In 2024, Second Harvest and its partners redistributed 87 million pounds of food. Much of that came from more than 7,500 food donors across Canada, food businesses with surplus food. They include farms, greenhouses, processors, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers, retailers, hotels, restaurants, and institutions.

But back to what happened here. The email from Second Harvest regional office in Regina asked if Yorkton would like a truckload of potatoes – that would be 60,000 pounds – or half a truckload, 30,000 pounds. Yes, 15 tons of farm fresh, unwashed, Burbank Russets, loose in 2,000 pound totes. It was last year's crop for which a grower had to find a new home, probably to make room for this year's harvest. The email pointed out that a forklift and pallet jack would be needed to unload the potatoes. The food security committee groups were contacted, with a basic question: Anyone have any bright ideas?

Well, the group thought it should take on the opportunity, and one of the committee members did have a bright idea. She knows the people at Smith Steel west of the city, asked if they had the necessary equipment and a place to store the potatoes, and within a day the answer came back from Mike and Dawn Smith. Yes, Smith Steel will help with the unloading and storage. Second Harvest was informed Yorkton would take half a truckload, and delivery was set for the week of August 25th. Then on August 20th Second Harvest asked if they could delivery earlier, and the group agreed despite the short notice. On August 22nd the potatoes arrived shortly after 9 in the morning. But this was also the day that the phone lines were down across Yorkton and a wide area, which made it challenging getting in touch with the truck driver who apparently had the

wrong address, and needed to know where to go. It all worked out. The potatoes arrived, and an army of volunteers set out to transfer them into boxes and smaller containers for distribution.

Potatoes were gone from Smith Steel in about two and a half weeks. At SIGN on Broadway, which is where residents could go to pick them up for themselves, the boxes and bins were empty a few days later. As potatoes were sorted at Smith Steel, some were set aside because they were soft and not suitable for the table. Those were sent out to farms in the area to be used for livestock feed.

The number of people who ended up eating Second Harvest potatoes is an unknown. But the organizers do know that they were distributed throughout the area – several first nations came for potatoes for their residents. Others who shared them with clients and members included St. Henry's church in Melville, Preeceville United Church, staff at the Ministry of Social Services at the Kuziak Building, Yorkton Housing Corporation, Good Spirit Housing, SIGN, and of course the member organizations of the food security committee.

As Martha Gares of the Community Fridge, and a member of the committee, posted on social media when it was all done... “This is just the beginning, and it shows what we can achieve when we work together.”

To get an overview of the work of the committee and the member organizations, as well as the great potato giveaway, we talked to three committee members.

Marilyn Lutz is organizer of the Love Bus, a refurbished yellow school bus that goes out on the streets of Yorkton most Friday nights to distribute food and other donated items. Since the Love Bus is, literally, volunteer driven, it sometimes has to stay parked for lack of a driver, in which case people are invited to come to Prairie Harvest Christian Life Centre, where food is stored and prepared for the Friday night runs.

The Love Bus on Friday nights. Where does it go? What does it do?

**Marilyn Lutz**

Well, we started after COVID, we started splitting the the city in half. So we would go one week from Broadway north, and then the next week we would go from Broadway south. So, we always messaged the Facebook page to tell the people where we're going to go. And some people would come to the bus and meet us at the church before we would head out.

**Dick DeRyk**

And on the bus, there are volunteers.

**Marilyn Lutz**

Yep, there's usually four of us.

**Dick DeRyk**

And there's food.

**Marilyn Lutz**

Food, lots of food. Every Friday night, no matter what, we have sandwiches, meat, some kind of meat, and peanut butter and jam. And we have in the lunch bag, there is, of course, a sandwich of their choice. And then we have usually, depends how much fruit we have, we have two or three fruits that get in a bag. They get a bag of chips, and sometimes we have homemade cookies, sometimes not. If there's anybody on the street, we stop. We have places that we know is in need of food, so we know the places, so we stop there, certain apartments, certain homes. We don't just bring them food, we pray with them also.

**Dick DeRyk**

How many on a typical evening come to a Love Bus looking for help?

**Marilyn Lutz**

Well, we do up usually 125 bags. Not always there's gonna be 125 people because families come. So they come, one sometimes they bring their families, you know. So sometimes there's families of nine. And I have a grandma that is raising all of her grandchildren. She's got 10, 12 grandchildren in her home. So yeah, she's raising all of her grandchildren. Wonderful kids. You know, we've got to know them, they love the bus, you know, we just get that connection with them because, you know, living in that kind of world, sometimes they don't get the one-on-one, the love, and to know that we care, like someone cares. Someone listens to them because we listen and you know, if they want to share with us things and everybody's welcome, right? Everybody's welcome.

**Dick DeRyk**

Has it been getting worse?

**Marilyn Lutz**

During the day I see people walking down the streets with backpacks, and you know they're homeless. I would have thought that they would be more of them coming to the bus, but you don't see a lot of them coming to the bus. You see families that may have four walls to sleep in, but they may not have any food in their cupboards or their fridge.

**Dick DeRyk**

When did the Love Bus start?

**Marilyn Lutz**

2017 or 18, yeah. I found the bus. I was campaigning for the Coldest Night of the Year, and a fellow at P and H elevator told me his son volunteers on there, and I got a hold of them and I had a great conversation with them, and I was hooked. I've been there ever since.

**Dick DeRyk**

Is it hard to find volunteers?

**Marilyn Lutz**

Yes. Especially if they have families. Children grow up, children are involved in activities. Yeah, it is very hard to find volunteers because it's a late night, you know. Sometimes we go till two o'clock in the morning. We start loading the bus at six. We're usually out by six-thirty if we don't have a lot of people waiting at the church.

**Dick DeRyk**

You get donations for the food that you give away? Is most of it donated, all of the donated?

**Marilyn Lutz**

Prairie Harvest is where we store our bus, where we store our food. Victory Church, we did there first. Prairie Harvest never had their big kitchen, they renovated. So we were first with Victory for the kitchen part. All churches are involved, not just Prairie Harvest. We went to the churches and just asked if they could have a tub at the back of the church or if some of their offering, if they wanted to strictly just give it to the bus. Anybody can donate to the bus.

**Dick DeRyk**

So then along comes August 2025, and there is a half a truckload of potatoes available. The Food Security Committee, of which you are a part, became involved in that. And one of the first problems that they encountered was where do we store 30,000 pounds of potatoes, right? And you had a solution for that.

**Marilyn Lutz**

Yes. I got on the phone, Dawn, do you have any space at Smith Steel for potatoes? That time they were getting rid of whatever was in this one building. And yeah, I gave her the dates. Yeah, they were terrific. I said one week, but I think it ended up being there for two and a half weeks. I mean, they were totally fine with it. They were just so good to us.

**Dick DeRyk**

It was a lot of potatoes.

**Marilyn Lutz**

It was a lot of potatoes, yes.

**Dick DeRyk**

I'm assuming you gave some away on the Love Bus.

**Marilyn Lutz**

Oh, yes, a couple weeks in a row. People were very grateful.

**Dick DeRyk**

Bonnie Rushowick is involved with the food shelf at St. Andrew's United Church, centrally located downtown. Bonnie is retired now from a long career in healthcare, most recently as the Saskatchewan Regional Director for Primary Care for Indigenous Services Canada. The food shelf at the church is open Fridays from 1 to 3 p.m.

**Bonnie Rushowick**

Well, the food shelf started a number of years ago, then it went into a bit of hiatus, of course, over the course of COVID. And we resurrected it about four years ago with the intent of being exactly what it says. a stop gap, knowing that there are a number of other groups and possible sources of support for individuals who experience food insecurity. But we felt we have our location on

Second Avenue and Smith in the downtown area, we've always had people drop in and ask for help and assistance.

So we've done it through a number of ways. Our minister, when she's been in the office, has often given out, we've had sandwiches that we've kept in the fridge, we had cards that could be used at some of the grocery stores, various things like that. But we decided that if we could have non-perishable foods available, we'd set up a cupboard, the donations have come in from all of our parishioners, and we have a storage area in the basement, and then we replenish that and then up to the cupboard literally. People can come on a Friday afternoon between one and three, and they're invited to come only once a month because we're trying to give as much opportunity for everyone.

We do not fill a bag. We give them a bag if they don't have one, they bring their own if they do, and we said take what you need and need what you take. So it's not a case of us deciding what they might want or not want. Times of years like fall, we've often had donations of perishable items, you know, so people who have excess potatoes, tomatoes, other things like that from the garden. We put those out and we put them into kind of packages that are easier to be put into a bag as part of the other products in order to carry. Christmas time, we quite often have donations of Christmas oranges like the mandarin oranges, so people can take a few of those home as goodies, that sort of thing. We've had donations sometimes of loaves of bread, again, that people can take what they need. Those things are usually smaller and a little more touch and go because it's not the sort of thing we can store.

We have 10 to 12 people who sign up to be the volunteers on those Friday afternoons, and we continue it all throughout the year. Although our church closes for one month in the summer, we keep the food shelf going. If it's the holiday season, we keep the food shelf going. The need for that additional food does not quit just because it's a holiday season or just because of this. Folks come in, all we ask is that they assign their name and the number of people in their household. That's just to give us a sense of how many people are out there that hopefully are benefiting a bit from our efforts.

Between January 1 of '24 to December 31st of '24, we had 322 individuals come in. The number of households that were supported was about 973, although I have to tell you that those are discrete numbers. We didn't go back and try to double check. What it did tell us is many people came in, and we even had when people have come in even from Manitoba, maybe they've been in the city for other things. We've never had a day that we've had the food shelf that we haven't had people. Some days are very busy, often those days prior to when some of the support funding comes out to individuals. Often that means they've really run out of funds and food. But what we're finding is there's never not people. And a lot of young moms coming in with children, a lot of grandmothers and their daughters and their grandchildren coming in, a lot of single men who are on their own and trying to make ends meet. Majority of people are walking, although some do have friends or relatives that will give them a ride. But that means in wintertime they're coming in the snow and they're carrying the food home in the snow. So these are folks, they're taking what they need and they need what they take. We do try to offer on those Fridays, coffee or hot chocolate for those that would like to stay, because we have a little upper hall that people could stay and visit.

When we talk about supplies, that includes for women sanitary supplies. We're providing toilet paper, providing things like toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, some of the things you don't necessarily think of, but that's something you need, and it's not always easy to get. We've even had folks that have donated stuff toys or clothing, not large amounts because we don't have that much room, but if we get something in, we put it out, we encourage any of the people accessing. If you see something that you could use, please take it. It's a small gesture in many ways, but we are very privileged, I think, to be able to do our part.

One of the things we do is we do up packages of a soup mix. So we purchase things from the bulk food store, and we have our adults and students who put together soup packages, you know, with lentils or this and that and bouillon it. And they have the entire recipe and what's on it, and in a bag, and the water, and you've got a really good pot of nutritious soup. And those have been very well received.

### **Dick DeRyk**

You got an email from Martha that said we've been offered half a truckload of 15 tons of potatoes. What was your first reaction when you saw that?

### **Bonnie Rushowick**

It was kind of like, gulp. And the more you thought about it, we should be able to do this. It wasn't a Yorkton project. Yes, it was centralized here, but we realized you know, it's not how much can St. Andrews take or how much can SIGN take. It was how much can we coordinate to get out the doors for all the people in the area that would and could benefit from it. And then I thought, what a great idea. And off we went and we did it.

### **Dick DeRyk**

You were quite involved in it. It was a busy couple of weeks.

### **Bonnie Rushowick**

Very, yes. Loading up what you could take initially, and then realizing there's a lot there, sorting through, running around getting boxes, bags, banana boxes, strong boxes, and then realizing those really strong boxes, they're really heavy and you're gonna lift them. And I know when Irma and I did for Big Brothers Big Sisters, she'd had a number of cloth bags donated by a particular group a number of years ago. And we filled those up. They held about 15 to 20 pounds of potatoes, and we filled those up and we filled her SUV to take to families that have children who are mentored as part of Big Brothers Big Sisters. And we had all sorts of the tote bags, the reusable bags that you get from the grocery stores, things that could be carried by people. But we also had Cote First Nation. They brought a big trailer in. Smith Steel again came up. They had the skids there. We loaded up, I think it was the equivalent of two and a half bags of those big totes right onto their big trailer that they took. Kahkewistahaw was in, Key was in. We ensured that this gift of food went beyond the borders. We said if you could use them and reuse them within your community, that's fabulous.

This really went a long, long way in a variety of ways. We were very pleased. We loaded up some and we brought it over to St. Andrews, and what we did is we redistributed in smaller amounts into paper bags in amounts that could be carried so that people could access and put them into the bags of food that they were getting at the food shelf and still be able to carry them home.

We had such help from the city as well as those that work with Good Spirit Housing and Yorkton Housing. We dropped them off at the various places, you know, Independent Manor, etc. Queen Elizabeth Court, and we put them out so people could help themselves and take what they could use, carry. It's a sort of thing that you do something that can assist. And I think we could feel good about the effort made.

**Dick DeRyk**

30,000 pounds of potatoes and gone in two and a half weeks, essentially. I still shake my head and say, you know, that's really quite exceptional.

**Bonnie Rushowick**

Well, when we saw those big bags, like when they call them a tote bag, it's a totally different concept of what a tote bag is. Yeah, when I first walked into the shed at Smith Steel, I just kind of like, huh. Because you start sorting and putting them in, and you think you'll never get to the bottom. Well, the first time we made it to the bottom of one of the bags, we let up a cheer. It was like, yes, we can do this.

**Dick DeRyk**

Who was involved in that as far as you know, sorting things and and organizing it at the Smith Steel end?

**Bonnie Rushowick**

Martha was there. We had Marilyn, Teresa from Bruno's place was involved later. They'd grab people as volunteers. So some of the people I didn't even know. It was almost like you made eye contact, you were helping. When the various First Nations came, they had their own people, obviously, and they did their work. They came in and and sorted. So we weren't trying to do all the work to have people just come and pick up a bag and leave. If you want for your group, come on in. We had a gentleman, Dave, from St. Henry's in Melville. He came along and loaded up and he filled the bags, he filled the boxes to take back to Melville to redistribute. He took one of the boxes of the discards for a friend that raised hogs. So everyone came and participated, loaded up, did what they could, brought bags and filled them, brought more bags and filled them. Everyone came in there and just worked and worked and worked to get those bags and boxes filled, and then to empty those and move those potatoes along.

**Dick DeRyk**

Major Laurie Reilly of the Salvation Army in Yorkton came to Yorkton in July of 2024. She and her husband, Major Gary Reilly, are serving in their sixth location in the past 26 years, three others having been in Saskatchewan. They came back to Saskatchewan from Ontario when the opportunity presented itself because, as Laurie says, this is where they want to retire. The Salvation Army, long located on Booth Street, named after the Salvation Army founder, purchased the former home of the Parkland Community Church on South Front Street in early 2025. Their food bank had been located there for several years, and when the building became available, it was decided to move all their operations there. Since then, their worship space has moved in and renovations are underway so the thrift store can be moved in next summer. The food bank is open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.



**Laurie Reilly**

Way back, the food bank was out of the church, and then the food bank was out of the thrift store. So with moving over to 78 South Front Street, it's allowed us more room, more sorting area, and now we can help more people.

**Dick DeRyk**

What is your sense of the level of food insecurity in Yorkton and area?

**Laurie Reilly**

I think it's really bad. We know how much people get for help from the government, and after rent, there's just not much left for food. We see our numbers going up gradually, but steady.

**Dick DeRyk**

Is that because people are finding out about it or because the need is increasing?

**Laurie Reilly**

I think both. We've rearranged some things in the food bank so it's kind of less intrusive. No means test. They just come in and show their ID and then they're given food. Everything is put into the system. The Salvation Army uses Link2Feed and we do try and gather some information just so that we can send it to Food Banks Canada and they know what area population to canvas for the government, we're their stats, basically. I think a lot of them who come in are on support. We have people come in with all sorts of stories. I just got a job, I just planned a down payment on my my apartment, and I have no food left. I have three kids. There's always a need, no matter what you make, sometimes. Sometimes they just want to come in and talk.

**Dick DeRyk**

Do you have a group of volunteers who help you out?

**Laurie Reilly**

They're very, very faithful. That volunteer base is probably going to be expanding, probably in the new year. And then we'll get volunteers also for the thrift store. And I'm always looking for volunteers for kettles.

**Dick DeRyk**

Kettle season is coming up.

**Laurie Reilly**

It is, yes.

**Dick DeRyk**

Where do you get the food that you distribute?

**Laurie Reilly**

All the major grocery stores here in Yorkton donate stuff like dented boxes, but they're still sealed. CanGrow, they donate a lot of produce they have left over. All sorts of people, private gardeners, they bring in stuff and we buy. We have a source at one of the grocery stores that calls Maria to

say, hey, this is on sale. Do you need some? We've got a great rapport with the stores and the community.

**Dick DeRyk**

A potato donation.

**Laurie Reilly**

30,000 pounds of potatoes, yeah. I thought, oh, everybody in Yorkton is going to be eating potato soup the next month. We went down a couple times. We took boxes to the food bank. I had to leave. I had to go to Yellowknife with the Salvation Army Emergency Disaster Services. So I was there for a week, and then the next week I had to catch up on all the work and the emails. So by the time I was ready to go, it had all been dispersed. We took about 24 cases, they're all gone.

**Dick DeRyk**

You are a member of the food security committee that was fairly recently formed.

**Laurie Reilly**

Yeah, it's amazing because all the people in this group have been in Yorkton for a long time. So it's great information for me. I see the Salvation Army as donation management. It's kind of like, oh, we have 10 bags of big flour, you know, the large bags. We can't open it ourselves because it's an allergen. I'll just give a text message. Anybody need 20 pounds of flour? Or if we have a ton of granola bars coming in, I'll send it out. You know, does anybody need this? Yeah, it's amazing how much we've learned and how much support we've given each other.

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