

## FURNITURE BANKS

### INTRODUCTION

Furniture banks (FBs) are not-for-profit organizations designed to provide free, quality used household furnishings to individuals and families in need (Furniture Bank Association of North America, 2012). According to the Furniture Bank Association of North America (2012), there are five recognized FBs across Canada, including one in British Columbia, one in Nova Scotia, and three in Ontario.

While there are currently no official FBs in the Guelph-Wellington area, the Churches of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul provide furniture and furniture vouchers for those in need of emergency assistance (based on a needs assessment). Thrift stores, such as Bibles for Missions, Goodwill, Value Village and the Salvation Army, sell second-hand furniture at low prices, but are often still not affordable for those living in poverty.

The Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) is a program available to people on social assistance in certain situations to help pay for things (including furniture) needed to start up a new home, stay in a current home, or protect the health and well-being of residents (CLEO, 2011). The CSUMB was eliminated in the 2012 budget and will no longer be available as of January 2013. This change will result in an increase need for furniture and household items for people on social assistance in our community.



### A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE: ADAM'S STORY

Adam just moved out on his own after living at a Wyndham House Long-Term Residence for a year. He received assistance from Family & Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington to help cover first and last month's rent for his new apartment, but would have to wait an additional month before he would have enough to buy food, let alone any household items. Wyndham House Youth Resource Center was able to give Adam some cutlery, blankets and sheets, and he was referred to the food bank for groceries.

Although Adam was given enough food to last him for two weeks at the food bank, he was unable to prepare most of it as he did not have any pots and pans or dishes. He managed to make spaghetti and pasta sauce by placing the noodles in the glass container of the pasta sauce and then placing it in the microwave.

Adam is in his third month of independent living and has still been unable to purchase some of the basic necessary items needed to have a functioning kitchen.

## A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE: SARA'S STORY

Sara and her partner lived in a one-bedroom apartment. They had accumulated enough furniture to comfortably fill their apartment, donated by family and friends and purchased from Salvation Army and Goodwill. After 8 months of residing at the same apartment, Sara and her partner were involved in a domestic dispute. Her partner was sent to prison and Sara was evicted from her apartment. There was nowhere for Sara to store her belongings and furniture when she left her apartment, so her landlord was forced to throw most of it away and donate the rest.

Sara moved into a shelter once evicted from her apartment. Now that she has found housing again, she has nothing with which to furnish it. It is difficult for Sara to have to start from scratch again as she is on social assistance and does not have money to furnish her new place after paying for rent, transportation and food.

## FURNITURE BANK MODELS

### Large-Scale Furniture Banks

Larger FBs operate on a similar structure, offering mostly donated household furniture to individuals and families with proven needs (FBANA, 2012). FBs, like those in Toronto and Ottawa, are modeled on a referral system whereby recipients must be referred by a recognized agency or shelter in order to receive furniture (Furniture Bank 2011; Furniture Bank of Ottawa n.d.). Services are available to refugees, women and children fleeing abusive relationships, and individuals/families experiencing financial hardship. The furniture is free and families/individuals are often allowed to select their own furniture/furnishings out of the

organization's warehouse. In some cases, however, a small delivery fee may apply (Furniture Bank 2011; Furniture Bank of Ottawa n.d.).

### Small-Scale Furniture Banks

Small-scale FBs are also available in some communities through local churches. For instance, the I-Care Furniture Bank in Brampton is led by the Immanuel Christian Reformed Church and provides furniture to families in transition. In many cases, these FBs are informal and operate on an 'as needed' basis (I-Care Furniture Bank n.d.; Wolfville Baptist Furniture Bank n.d.).

## IMPACTS OF FURNITURE BANKS

In general, FBs offer a great deal of support to individuals and families in need. In 2011, the FB in Toronto (2012) provided home furnishings to "2,752 households comprised of more than 5000 individuals" and the Furniture Bank of Ottawa (n.d.) helped 50 families a month, totalling nearly 2,400 people including 1,200 children. Similarly, in 2009 the Parker Street Food and Furniture Bank (2011) distributed over 7,000 household items to disadvantaged individuals and families. These numbers are supported by many success stories that highlight how meaningful FBs are to those in need. One such success story is that of Francisca who was referred to the Furniture Bank in Toronto by the Peel Family Shelter (Furniture Bank 2011). As a recent immigrant from Guatemala, Francisca and her family of five required furniture to fill their new apartment. The Furniture Bank allowed her the opportunity to choose her own furnishings and provided her and her family "the hope of a safe and secure future" as they adjusted to their new surroundings (Furniture Bank 2011).

Based on stories similar to Francisca, it is suggested that these organizations not only provide furniture, they also:

- improve quality of life;
- relieve the financial stress of having to furnish a home;

- provide community connections and volunteer/employment experience;
- offer a sense of security and stability; and
- assist people in overcoming barriers and becoming self-sufficient.

## WHERE DOES THE FURNITURE COME FROM?

Furniture obtained by an organization comes from community donations and only quality, gently used items are accepted (FBANA 2012). Each piece of furniture is thoroughly inspected to ensure it is free from “harmful substances and parasites” (Furniture Bank 2011). Toronto Furniture Bank employees, for example, inspect furniture at least four times during the screening process and take regular training courses in order to minimize potential health concerns. To encourage members of the community to donate, most FBs issue a charitable tax receipt for any donated furniture worth more than \$25.00 (FBANA 2012; Furniture Bank 2012; Furniture Bank of Ottawa n.d.).

## FURNITURE BANKS & BED BUGS

In recent years, Ontario and other Canadian provinces and territories have seen an increase in the number of bed bug reports. Bed bugs are an exposure pest and are not necessarily associated with living conditions. Bed bugs can happen to anyone, anywhere (bedbugsinfo.ca).

As a preventative measure, bed bug experts caution people to be careful when buying or receiving used furniture (bedbugsinfo.ca). Having bed bugs is stressful. Getting rid of them requires lots of hard work and extra expense.

Toronto Furniture Bank has a thorough screening process that includes 4 different inspections by trained staff- twice during the pick-up and drop off stages and twice after the furniture is delivered to the client (Furniture Bank, 2011). Staff members are continually trained to identify whether furniture may be contaminated with bed bugs or other pests

(Furniture Bank, 2011). Any furniture showing signs of contamination are not accepted. As a preventative measure, all facilities and delivery vehicles are routinely inspected and treated by a professional pest control company (Furniture Bank, 2011).

### Inspecting Used Furniture for Bed Bugs

When bringing used furniture into your home, remember to thoroughly inspect all furniture with a flashlight prior to bringing it into the home, especially all seams, cracks, piping, corners, tufting, zippers, buttons, and joints (Health Canada, 2011). For wooden furniture like dressers, cabinets, tables, chairs and bookshelves, check all surfaces and corners. Remove drawers and look at the inside, the top, sides, back and legs, paying extra attention to any cracks. Carefully check any wicker furniture

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ESTABLISHING NEW FURNITURE BANKS

In order for a successful furniture bank to open in the Guelph-Wellington area, the following requirements need to be taken into consideration:

- A large storage space to hold the furniture (i.e. the Furniture Bank in Toronto has a 30 000 square foot warehouse) that is easily accessible to all
- Establishing positive relationships with corporations, foundations and individual funders who will help support the FB via donations
- Developing partnerships with local agencies and shelters to develop mutually agreed upon eligibility criteria
- Volunteers and paid employees (the Furniture Bank (2011) in Toronto employs many recipients and individuals on ODSP)
- Funds for advertising
- A list of health concerns and the implementation of a thorough screening process

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, FBs exist as a way to provide gently used furniture to people in need. FBs in Toronto, Ottawa, and Halifax serve thousands of people yearly and based on recipient testimonials, these FBs offer more than just furniture, they improve quality of life. However, operating these facilities require extensive space, time and resources and a considerable amount of planning would be needed before one is implemented in Guelph-Wellington. Yet in the absence of sufficient funds to provide furniture and other household goods from CSUMB, our community must acknowledge the role it has in working together to find a local solution.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### For the provincial government:

- Rescind cuts and restore the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit for people on social assistance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination would like to acknowledge Rachel Schumann, Intern, ICES/The Research Shop for her contributions to this research profile.

**Principal Organization:** Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, Research & Policy Working Group

**Partner Organization:** ICES/The Research Shop

**Authors:** Rachel Schumann

**Research Methods:** Literature review, key informant interviews

## REFERENCES

*Community Legal Education Ontario.* (2011). Retrieved October 29, 2012, from <http://www.cleo.on.ca/en/publications/csub/who-can-get-community-start-and-maintenance-benefit>

*Furniture Bank Association of North America.* (2012). Retrieved September 5, 2012, from <http://www.furniturebanks.org/>

*Furniture Bank of Ottawa.* (n.d.). Retrieved September 5, 2012, from [www.furniturebankofottawa.com](http://www.furniturebankofottawa.com)

*Furniture Bank of Toronto.* (2011). Retrieved September 5, 2012, from <http://www.furniturebank.org/>

“Services and Programs.” *Parker Street Furniture & Food Bank.* (2011) Retrieved September 5, 2012, from <http://www.parkerstreet.org/services/furniture.php>

“What is I-Care all about?” *I-Care Furniture Bank.* (n.d.). Retrieved September 5, 2012, from <http://www.immanuelcrc.ca/icare.html>

*Wolfville Baptist Church.* (n.d.). Retrieved September 5, 2012, from <http://www.wolfvillebaptist.ca/food-bankclothing-bankfurniture-bank.html>